

Teacher Wellness Practice #9: Attending to Our Feelings

By Sarah Rosenthal | Categories: Classroom Community, Wellness

I have an “emotion thesaurus” on my bookshelf that features 148 emotions, including information like physical signals, internal sensations, and mental responses associated with each.

Our species is blessed with an enormous range of feelings. Some of them we welcome with open arms. Others we wish would never show their face at our door again. But as we’ve grappled with the COVID-19 catastrophe, we’ve all been visited by these challenging guests. Overwhelm. Frustration. Irritation. Anger. Panic. Sadness. Despair. We could go through my thesaurus together and swap stories about times we’ve felt the hard ones in the last few months.



When one of these feelings sneaks in or jumps all over us, most of us have creative ways to send it packing. We get busy; we zone out; we say things like, “Suck it up and be strong,” “Let’s look at the silver lining,” “The upside is ...,” and “I try to be grateful for ...”

I have no beef with getting things done, taking a break, being strong, or invoking feelings of gratitude. I like doing all those things. In

fact, something I'm grateful for is my daily gratitude practice, the benefits of which are supported by robust data.

But when we use such actions as ways to regularly shut out hard feelings, we're doing ourselves an enormous disservice. Emotions are the colors in the human palette. Think of a palette from which one by one you banish the green of jealousy, the blue of sadness, the red of anger – let alone the innumerable tones and hues of each. Your paintings will be lacking in depth.

Or think about each feeling being a gesture you make with your body. Start subtracting those and your body becomes increasingly stiff and stilted over time.

The same thing happens to our inner world when we shy away from hard feelings. We become constricted mentally and emotionally. Just as unfortunate, we become less and less able to support others who are going through tough times – because what we can't accept in ourselves is hard to accept in those around us. If we are skilled at shoving the feelings away, our lives start feeling numb and disconnected. If we're not so skilled at it, the "bad" feelings might erupt in ways that cause harm to us and others.

It's become clear that pandemic-related challenges will continue for a long time to come. And we can expect that we're going to keep having moments and periods when we have uncomfortable reactions to them. If we want to stay fluid, flexible, and compassionate, one key is practicing our capacity to befriend emotional discomfort.

Culturally speaking, this turns us into salmon swimming upstream. I'm reminded of this every time I unwrap a cough drop. The wrappers are printed with slogans like "Tough is your middle name" and "Get back in the game." Clearly, our society does not encourage us to acknowledge and hang out with discomfort and difficulty. So it stands to reason, most of us don't feel exactly eager to embrace these states.

But just as we readily comfort an upset child, we can practice attending to ourselves in the same kind, accepting way. We don't have to be good at it and we don't have to do it nonstop. But we can choose to point ourselves in the direction of developing this capacity. This week's practice, which draws on the work of Eugene Gendlin, Tara Brach, and Ann Weiser Cornell, among others, is intended to help you acknowledge and welcome any and all feelings: pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral.

You might try the practice daily for the coming week, at the same time each day. Consider starting each time by reviewing the instructions; then set them aside. It's best to do this practice by yourself.

Attending to Our Feelings

- Find a place where you can be alone for five minutes. Sit or lie comfortably (or as comfortably as you can), with your eyes closed.
- Ground yourself briefly with some slow breathing or a short body scan.
- Now bring your attention inside. Starting in your throat, move your attention down into your chest, belly, and abdomen.
- Let your attention rest in the inner area between your throat and abdomen. A great deal of self-knowledge – about how we're *really* doing – resides here.
- Silently invite into awareness whatever wants to be known right now. You can keep the invitation wide open or focus on a specific topic that's troubling you (for example, invite whatever wants to be known about saying goodbye to the school year and to your students).
- Then just wait, with an open, welcoming attitude.
- You might notice any of the following:
 - A sensation (examples: constriction in throat, bubbly or fluttery feeling in heart area, stomach churning)
 - An image (a field of flowers, a pile of rocks, a building, a person, an animal)

- A word or phrase ("Why, why, why?" "So glad that's over!" "What about the fall?")
- An emotion (sadness, grief, relief, fatigue, anger, excitement, disappointment, peace, fear, numbness)
- Whatever comes, imagine turning toward it and welcoming it: "Hello. Welcome." If you experience a sensation in one part of your body, you might place a gentle hand there as a sign of acceptance and comfort.
- If nothing comes, that's a "something," too. Welcome it the same way.
- If you wish, ask it what it wants you to know. Then wait and listen.
- After another quiet minute, thank the life inside you that allowed this moment of contact with yourself. If something came up, thank it for showing up and let it know you'll continue to attend to it over time.
- Open your eyes when you are ready. As you transition back into your day, move a bit slowly and gently at first so as not to jangle this quieter part of you.

I recommend checking 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 the experience.

Q *How did it feel to experiment with this approach to being with your feelings? Turn to your imaginary or real partner!*

You might be thinking:

"I like the analogy of being with a child who's upset about something. I'm totally there for kids who are struggling, and I'd like to be more like that with myself too."

"I love the idea that tuning into myself more often will increase my capacity to deal effectively with whatever happens next – in my job, my life, and the world. It makes me feel more confident about moving forward."

"This practice is way too 'woo-woo' for me. I find that when I feel bad, reminding myself to look on the bright side works best. That keeps me feeling hopeful and effective."

"I tried it a few times and didn't feel anything. I know you said that nothing is a 'something,' too but I felt disappointed that I didn't experience any strong sensations, images, words, or feelings."

"I didn't have any strong experiences, either, but I think it's valuable to practice sending myself the message that however I feel, even if I feel nothing, it's OK. Plus, even just giving myself this caring attention for a few minutes is a big treat."

"Every time I do this, I have a totally different experience. One day I felt a lot of joy. Another day I felt despair. I could never have predicted in advance what would happen. There's so much going on beneath the surface!"

After a week, if you enjoy this practice, you might continue it, gradually increasing the length of time so you can do each part more slowly. But the emphasis here is on "gradually." When we get over-ambitious with self-care practices, we're more likely to drop them altogether. With self-care, the tortoise is always preferable to the hare.

Next week's post in the Teacher Wellness Blog Series will focus on investigating the notion of "adequate."