

Writing Samples

Heather Minter

heather.m.minter@gmail.com

703-593-0273

www.heathermcgeeminter.com

Putting the Self in Care, Excerpt from The Power of Relationships: A Practitioner's Guide to Trauma-Sensitive Teaching

Our lives require maintenance, just like a car does. Self-care is that maintenance. Just like a car, bodies need to be able to run, and bodies need to be able to stop. We also want bodies to last as long as they can. Self-care is all about giving the self the kind of maintenance that is needed in order to function best. This requires us to figure out what works best for us, to help us show up more fully in our lives and get our systems running when they need to run, stopping when they need to stop, and lasting as long and as well as they can.

Bodies are magical. They hold all the memories of our entire lifetimes. Every single thing that each one of us experiences happens in our bodies. Bodies are truly the only home a person ever really has for sure. Bodies are a collective. They are the sites of connection, play, laughter, and joy. But bodies are also the sites of fear, abandonment, heartache, and pain. Fortunately, bodies are also miracles of resilience and radical healing.

It's because of the body's amazing capacity for change and healing that it is able to handle the onslaught of stressors in life. It's this capacity to change that enables anyone who chooses to make small and meaningful differences in their self-care to better enable their body to ride the waves of life.

According to the American Psychological Association's 2019 survey, more than seventy-five percent of American adults report symptoms of stress, and half report these symptoms keeping them up at night. (APA, 2020) The top issues worrying American adults are health care, the economy, trust in government, crime, war, terrorist attacks, high taxes, unemployment, and low wages. (Winerman, 2017) Adults are being bombarded on all sides by things that they have little control over to change. It can feel overwhelming. On top of that, those who have chosen a caregiving profession are under increased stress and the likelihood of burnout, compassion fatigue, and secondary traumatic stress.

Burnout is often seen in helping professions and is characterized by exhaustion, alienation, and reduced performance. (IQWiG, 2020) Burnout is a state that goes beyond just feeling tired. It is when all of the energy has been used up and we become numb to the value of our work and unable to continue doing what we want and need to do. It's usually coupled with compassion fatigue. This goes beyond numbness about work outcomes and bleeds into numbness about other people's pain. This can happen because of secondary traumatic stress (STS). STS

happens when people are over-exposed to the trauma and stress of others. Exposure to trauma and distress can negatively impact your mental and physical health, as well as the well-being of yourself and your family, your students, and your school.

In other words, you can feel used up, and this has a negative impact on the very reason you got into the profession in the first place. The result can be decreased care for students and can lead to more serious mental health conditions like PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), anxiety, or depression. (Cocker & Joss, 2016)

As teachers, we are often not only high achievers, but we are also incredibly compassionate people. Teachers work extremely hard and are always looking for ways to improve their environments to help students. These are incredible and praiseworthy traits, but they can mean that you may struggle with perfectionism and you may not give yourself the time that you need for rest and recuperation. (Tapp, n.d.)

Additionally, teachers are also human beings. And, as we learned in Chapter 1, human beings have a high likelihood of having experienced trauma in their lifetimes. Recall the original ACEs study—over 60% of adults had at least one ACE and 16% had 4 or more types of ACEs. (CDC, n.d.). We know the incredible impact that trauma can have on the body and the long-term physical and mental health challenges associated with exposure to toxic stress. This means that, as teachers, we are not only susceptible to the stress of our jobs but also the stress that comes from experiencing our own traumatic events.

This may sound terribly discouraging, but there's good news too. A consistent self-care practice can help manage stress, increase overall wellness, and help buffer against the long-term impact of exposure to early adversity.

The goal of self-care, specifically for teachers, is to help you reduce the stress on your body, inviting a greater internal balance, equanimity in your work, and a clear heart and mind. Living under the amount of stress teachers endure can sometimes feel overwhelming, especially on days when we feel under-resourced and undervalued. Self-care is a way of reclaiming your personal power and turning it towards your own health and wellness and ability to thrive. Self-care is also necessary in order to find the added strength it takes to build the relationships that will act as the buffer between the children you teach and care for and the negative impact of trauma.

Surrender

We really don't have control over our lives. Think about it. Nothing in life ever turns out the way you think it will. We are subject to so many variables that are beyond our control. We may have the illusion that if we really have it all together we can predict an outcome and have it all work out. And sometimes we do get a positive outcome. But almost never without some hiccup or delay.

I've been working in ceramics for a few years. And this is a lesson that I continually face with the clay. I do my best to build with care. I do my best to let it dry at the right pace. I do my best to smooth the edges and refine the details. I do my best to fire it at the right time and glaze it the way I want. But the end result is never exactly what I set out to do. I am redirected every step of the way. And sometimes I'm thrilled, and I make something so cool. And other times it shatters, and I just toss it in the trash.

Chögyam Trungpa said, "The bad news is you're falling through the air, nothing to hang on to, no parachute. The good news is, there's no ground."

We can flail about and fight and resist the changes that come at us. Or we can surrender.

Surrender doesn't mean we just give up. It doesn't mean we don't keep trying. It just means that we hold loosely to the outcome. We hold loosely the idea of control.

I have this thing I say whenever life redirects me. Well, I usually say this after I have a little meltdown and catastrophize and feel like the world is ending. Then I take a deep breath, and say, "I guess this is what we're doing now. Let's go."

We are ever in a state of uncertainty. We are ever in a liminal time. Our atoms are in constant motion. Our cells are dividing. We are moving through time and space at wicked speeds. All we can do is surrender.

To Coffee or Not to Coffee?

To be honest, I went into this piece thinking I would be writing about the detrimental effects of coffee. But I was dead wrong. Coffee has a host of health benefits. I pulled a host of resources including Johns Hopkins and Harvard Health. The message was clear - coffee is good for you (with a couple of caveats)!

First of all, let's talk about caffeine. Research shows that about 90% of U.S. adults consume some form of caffeine every day. By blocking adenosine, caffeine increases activity in your brain and releases other neurotransmitters like norepinephrine and dopamine. This reduces tiredness and makes you feel more alert. Some studies suggest it can reduce appetite and lower the risk for depression.

But coffee isn't just caffeine. Coffee contains vital antioxidants, riboflavin (vitamin B2), niacin (vitamin B3), magnesium, potassium, and various phenolic compounds. The typical Western diet provides more antioxidants from coffee than from fruits and vegetables combined. That doesn't say much for the Western diet which would improve greatly from increased fruits and vegetables. However, it is good to know that consuming coffee can give us these much-needed nutrients.

But the health benefits don't stop there.

Drinking coffee can help you live longer! One review of 40 studies concluded that drinking two to four cups of coffee daily was associated with a lower risk of death, regardless of factors like age, weight status, and alcohol consumption. One of the reasons this is the case is that coffee decreases breakage in DNA strands. And this happens quickly. It was measurable within two hours of intake. DNA breakage can lead to genetic mutations which ultimately lead to the development of cancer. It is also linked to the development of neurodegenerative disorders such as Alzheimer's and Parkinson's diseases.

Coffee drinkers are also less likely to develop Type 2 Diabetes and liver disease. This may be because coffee may help our bodies process glucose (sugar) better and keep our liver enzymes in the healthy range. Drinking coffee is also good for your heart. Consuming three to five cups a day was linked to a 15% decrease in heart disease and a 21% lower risk of stroke.

So, what's a healthy amount of coffee? According to the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, it's safe for most adults to drink three to five cups of coffee a day with a maximum intake of 400 milligrams of caffeine. Most cups of coffee contain about 95 milligrams of caffeine.

However, caffeine can be detrimental to some people. It is not recommended for children, pregnant people, and those with high blood pressure. It can also be dangerous for people taking Ephedrine, Theophylline, and Echinacea. It can also cause insomnia, nervousness, restlessness, nausea, and increased heart rate in some people. If you're having trouble sleeping, caffeine can mask the symptoms and lead to a dangerous cycle of low sleep.

Fortunately, decaf coffee has most of the same benefits without the health risks of caffeine. The research found consuming decaf coffee for four weeks or more reduced waist size, blood triglyceride levels, fasting blood glucose levels, and systolic blood pressure. Interestingly, decaf coffee was found to be even more effective than regular coffee in lowering systolic blood pressure.

But what about the cream and sugar?

Yes, these add to your daily calorie consumption and should be moderated. However, adding a little cream can also add some benefits. The fat slows the absorption of chemicals in the bloodstream. This means it reduces the spike in caffeine and enables it to stay with you longer. It also slows the absorption of sugars which means no sharp insulin spikes giving you more sustained energy. Cream can also make you feel more satiated. If you're trying to avoid dairy, coconut oil gives the same benefits and adds to a host of other benefits that we'll discuss in a future post.

Embrace the Serenity: The Wonders of Forest Bathing

No doubt the fast-paced, technology-driven world is hard on our minds and bodies. Finding tranquility can be challenging. But there's a simple technique for soothing that is free, accessible, and rejuvenating - forest bathing. The term comes from the Japanese tradition of "Shinrin-yoku," which means taking in the forest atmosphere. Walking amidst the trees is not only relaxing, but it benefits our whole self - physical, mental, and emotional well-being.

Walking amidst trees and greenery has been shown to lower blood pressure and heart rate. The fresh air, rich in oxygen and free from pollutants, invigorates the lungs and enhances respiratory function. Additionally, forest environments are abundant in phytoncides—natural compounds released by trees—that have antimicrobial properties, boosting the immune system and increasing the body's natural killer cells, which fight off infections and diseases. It's a symbiotic relationship. Trees take in the carbon dioxide that our bodies release. We take in the oxygen and phytoncides.

Being present within nature also helps our nervous and endocrine systems. Without the barrage of stimuli from our technological world, we are able to reset and recharge. It reduces the production of stress hormones like cortisol, leading to decreased anxiety and a clearer, more focused mind. Studies have shown that even short periods spent in nature can improve concentration, creativity, and problem-solving skills. The sounds and smells of nature are calming to the psyche. The rustling leaves, chirping birds, flowing water, and the smell of the soil alleviate depression and uplift the spirit.

When we take the time to commune with the trees it nurtures our connection to the natural world. In an era where many people feel disconnected from nature, this practice reminds us of our intrinsic bond with the earth. It encourages mindfulness and a presence in the moment, allowing individuals to appreciate the subtle wonders of the natural environment. This reconnection fosters a sense of stewardship and a desire to protect and preserve our natural surroundings.

Moving through the trees isn't about rigorous exercise. It's about being intentional and mindful about communing. Take it slowly. Leave your phone behind or on mute. Listen, absorb, witness, and breathe. Let go of the buzz and worries of modern life. In the embrace of the forest, we find a sanctuary from the stresses of modern life, reminding us of the simple, yet powerful, joys of being in nature. So, take a step into the woods and let the forest work its magic on you.