

Digital Workbook Edition

Educator's Guide to Compassion Fatigue

Prevent Burnout · Build Resilience · Reignite Purpose



By Joseph Wernau, LMSW | The Macro Lens

Teacher Self-Care Workbook
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THE MACRO LENS

Welcome & How to Use This Toolkit

Teaching is heart work. It can be both deeply rewarding and profoundly taxing.

You chose this profession because you care, about your students, their families, and their needs. You show up every day, often carrying more than anyone realizes. But as with all helping professions, giving so much of yourself comes at a cost. The weight of student trauma and need inevitably takes a toll on your well-being. And paradoxically, the more you care, the more vulnerable you become

The good news: you can protect your health and still show up authentically for your students. It requires intention and a commitment to making consistent choices that support your own well-being.

This toolkit provides information, tools, and exercises designed to help you:

- Understand student trauma and how it shows up in the classroom.
- Recognize the impact student trauma can have on you as a professional.
- Identify the signs of compassion fatigue.
- Reflect on your own experiences in teaching.
- Develop realistic self-care strategies you can maintain.

How to Use This Toolkit

- Work through the pages in order, or skip to the sections that speak to you most.
- Use the checklists to build awareness, the reflections to process your experiences, and the planning tools to take small, consistent steps forward.

About the Author

I am a licensed school social worker with years of experience working directly with students, families, and educators. In that role, I noticed a concerning gap: while trauma's impact on students is often discussed, far less attention is given to how student trauma affects the teachers and staff who support them every day.

In response, I developed and presented trauma-informed trainings for hundreds of teachers, paraprofessionals, and school staff. This toolkit is adapted from those trainings. It is designed to be both informative and practical, helping teachers everywhere better understand compassion fatigue and build strategies for sustainable self-care.

What is Trauma?

Trauma is the body's response to deeply distressing or disturbing events that overwhelm a person's ability to cope.

Types of Trauma

- **Acute:** a single distressing or disturbing event.
- **Chronic:** repeated exposure to similar events over time.
- **Complex:** multiple, varied events that happen over an extended period.

How Trauma Affects the Brain and Body



The amygdala, sometimes called the “feeling brain,” constantly scans the environment for danger. When harm occurs, whether physical or emotional, it stores everything we saw, heard, felt, smelled, or tasted before the event. Later, those cues can unconsciously trigger a survival response in the limbic system before the rational brain has time to process.

The limbic system's survival response is often described as “fight, flight, freeze, or fawn”:

- **Fight:** heightened alertness, aggression, or defensiveness.
- **Flight:** withdrawal, avoidance, or shutting down.
- **Freeze:** zoning out, feeling stuck, or unable to act.
- **Fawn:** appeasing or people-pleasing to stay safe, such as complying quickly or trying to calm others.

Quick Tip Trauma does not always look dramatic. Sometimes it shows up quietly, such as a student who never participates or always keeps their head down.

Repeated activation of this system over time can make it more sensitive, which means it may trigger more quickly and more often.

Reflection Activity

Which trauma responses have I noticed most often in my students? What did it look like?

Trauma in the Classroom

Trauma does not stay outside the school doors. It shows up in the ways students learn, behave, and relate to others.

Examples of Trauma Responses in the Classroom

- **Fight:** outbursts, defiance, frequent conflict with peers or teachers.
- **Flight:** skipping class, incomplete assignments, withdrawing into the background.
- **Freeze:** blank stares, zoning out, difficulty following instructions.
- **Fawn:** excessive compliance, people-pleasing, or trying to calm others to avoid conflict.

Trauma Triggers

Even small things associated with a child's past trauma can activate a trauma response. Some examples of things students may be triggered by:

- **Sound:** loud noises, a harsh or critical tone of voice, or even specific songs.
- **Smell:** perfumes, flowers, dirt, grass, or certain foods. These can be much harder to identify.
- **Sight:** images of fear, anger, sadness, violence, or even particular colors.
- **Touch:** textures, unexpected physical contact, or the discomfort of wet clothing.
- **Taste:** specific foods, drinks, or candies.
- **Uncertainty:** sudden changes in schedule or routine, especially without warning.

Quick Tip What looks like "bad behavior" may actually be a survival response. Asking "What happened to this student?" instead of "What's wrong with this student?" shifts the lens toward support and understanding.

Reflection Activity

What trauma responses have I noticed in my classroom? What potential triggers might have been present?

The Iceberg Model of Behavior

Student behavior is like an iceberg. We only see what is above the surface, while most of the story remains hidden underneath.

Above the Surface (What You See)

- Aggression
- Disruption
- Withdrawal
- Defiance
- Perfectionism

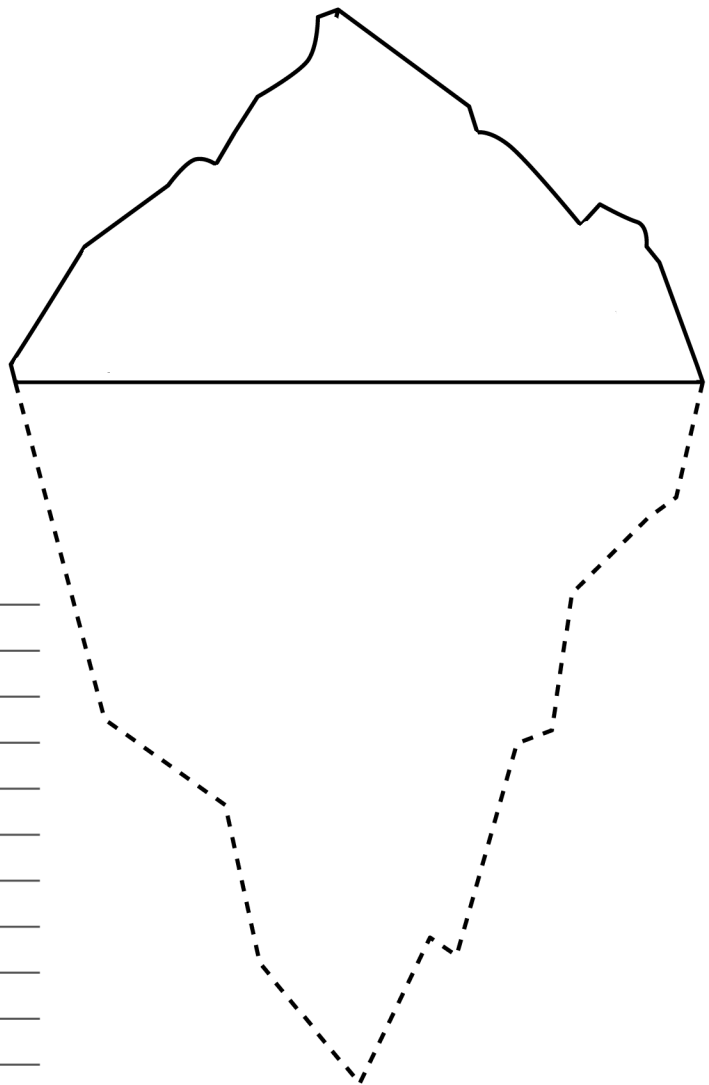
Below the Surface (What Drives it)

- Fear, anxiety, or shame
- Past trauma
- Family dynamics
- Sensory overload
- Unmet needs such as housing, food, or emotional support

Quick Tip When behavior feels overwhelming, pause to ask: What might be under the surface?

Reflection Activity

Think of one example of a student whose behavior has been challenging in your classroom. In the top of the iceberg, write the behaviors you observed (what was visible above the surface). In the bottom of the iceberg, write possible factors that may have been hidden underneath (what could have been driving the behavior). Use the lined space to record additional thoughts.



How Student Trauma Affects You

"The expectation that we can be immersed in suffering and loss daily and not be touched by it is as unrealistic as expecting to walk through water without getting wet."

– Rachel Naomi Remen, *Kitchen Table Wisdom* (1996)

Supporting students who carry trauma does not only affect them, it affects you as well. Over time, the weight of student stories and behaviors can shape how you feel about your work. The impact often shows up in the following ways:

Burnout

Definition: Long-term exhaustion caused by ongoing stress and heavy workload.

Example: You feel drained from constant grading, paperwork, and managing large class sizes. You find yourself counting down the days until the weekend and dreading Monday mornings.

Moral Distress

Definition: The tension of knowing what students need but being unable to provide it because of barriers outside your control. Can lead to feelings of guilt, shame, or anger.

Example: You know a student needs therapy or a safe home environment, but you can only offer support within the classroom. You feel frustrated and helpless.

Compassion Fatigue

Definition: *"The emotional residue or strain of exposure to working with those suffering from the consequences of traumatic events."* – American Institute of Stress

Example: After weeks of supporting a student in crisis, you notice yourself becoming less patient with the rest of the class, more irritable, and emotionally exhausted.

Our Focus

While burnout and moral distress are real and important, they are often tied to systemic barriers such as workload, staffing, or policy. These challenges matter, but they can be difficult for any one teacher to change.

This workbook will focus on compassion fatigue because it is the impact we have the most control over. By learning to recognize its signs and practicing intentional self-care, we can protect our own well-being while continuing to show up authentically for students.

Quick Tip Naming what you are experiencing does not mean you are weak, it means you are human. Recognizing the signs is the first step to protecting your own well-being.

Recognizing the Signs of Compassion Fatigue

Compassion fatigue does not look the same for everyone. It can affect your emotions, body, thoughts, relationships, and work. Reviewing these signs can help you notice patterns in yourself and take action early.

Common Symptoms of Compassion Fatigue

- **Emotional:** mood swings, reduced empathy, irritability, anger, anxiety, or hypersensitivity.
- **Physical:** exhaustion, changes in appetite or sleep, headaches, weakened immune system, or digestive problems.
- **Mental:** difficulty concentrating, forgetfulness, pessimism, hypervigilance, or unwanted thoughts.
- **Relational:** withdrawal from friends or family, distrust of others, conflict, or reduced patience.
- **Professional:** decreased quality of work, loss of motivation or confidence, detachment from colleagues, or diminished career fulfillment.

Quick Tip Experiencing symptoms of compassion fatigue does not mean you are failing; it means you care. You are not alone. Many teachers experience these symptoms.

Take a Pause

The next few pages dive into the signs and symptoms of compassion fatigue. This can feel heavy if you're working through the workbook in one sitting. Before moving on, take five minutes to reset.

- Step outside for a short walk
- Pet your dog or snuggle with your cat
- Watch a video that makes you laugh

Even small breaks can help your mind and body recharge, so you can come back with fresh energy.

Self-Check: Emotional Symptoms

Compassion fatigue often shows up in our emotions first. These are common signs to watch for.

Instructions: Read through the list below and check off any symptoms you have experienced, either now or in the past. Then, use the reflection space to explore how these symptoms are impacting you currently.

Emotional Symptoms May Include:

- ☐ Mood swings or sudden changes in emotions
- ☐ Irritability, anger, or frustration
- ☐ Heightened sensitivity or overreaction to small stressors
- ☐ Anxiety or ongoing worry
- ☐ Persistent sadness, hopelessness, or tearfulness
- ☐ Feeling emotionally numb or disconnected
- ☐ Decreased ability to feel empathy or compassion
- ☐ Guilt or shame, especially about “not doing enough”
- ☐ Loss of enjoyment in activities you used to love



Reflection Activity

How are the emotional effects of compassion fatigue impacting my life at this time?

Self-Check: Physical Symptoms

Compassion fatigue can impact the body just as much as the mind. These are common physical signs to pay attention to.

Instructions: Read through the list below and check off any symptoms you have experienced, either now or in the past. Then, use the reflection space to explore how these symptoms are impacting you currently.

Physical Symptoms May Include:

- ☐ Constant fatigue or low energy
- ☐ Difficulty sleeping or oversleeping
- ☐ Frequent headaches or body aches
- ☐ Digestive issues or changes in appetite
- ☐ Weakened immune system, frequent colds or illness
- ☐ Rapid heart rate, shallow breathing, or muscle tension
- ☐ Restlessness or inability to relax
- ☐ Physical exhaustion that does not improve with rest



Reflection Activity

How are the physical effects of compassion fatigue impacting my daily routines or health?

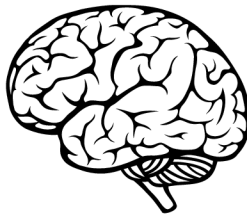
Self-Check: Mental Symptoms

Compassion fatigue can weigh heavily on your thoughts and focus. These are common mental signs that may appear over time.

Instructions: Read through the list below and check off any symptoms you have experienced, either now or in the past. Then, use the reflection space to explore how these symptoms are impacting you currently.

Mental Symptoms May Include:

- ☐ Difficulty concentrating or staying focused
- ☐ Memory problems or forgetfulness
- ☐ Pessimism or negative thinking patterns
- ☐ Racing thoughts or inability to “shut off” your mind
- ☐ Hypervigilance, feeling constantly on edge
- ☐ Intrusive or unwanted thoughts
- ☐ Difficulty making decisions
- ☐ Mental exhaustion or feeling overwhelmed easily



Reflection Activity

How are the mental effects of compassion fatigue impacting my focus or thinking patterns?

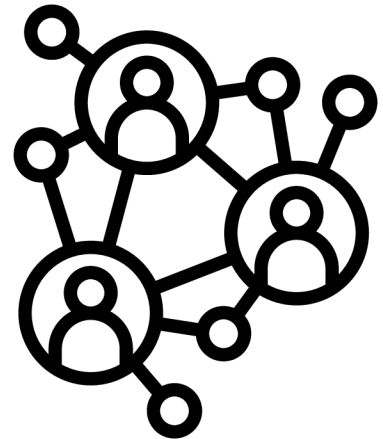
Self-Check: Relational Symptoms

Compassion fatigue can affect how we connect with others, both at work and in our personal life. These are common relational signs to be aware of.

Instructions: Read through the list below and check off any symptoms you have experienced, either now or in the past. Then, use the reflection space to explore how these symptoms are impacting you currently.

Relational Symptoms May Include:

- ☐ Withdrawing from friends, family, or colleagues
- ☐ Feeling isolated or disconnected from others
- ☐ Increased conflict or irritability in relationships
- ☐ Distrust or difficulty relying on others
- ☐ Reduced patience with students, coworkers, or loved ones
- ☐ Difficulty setting or maintaining boundaries
- ☐ Avoidance of social situations or gatherings
- ☐ Feeling like you have little left to give to relationships



Quick Tip: Compassion fatigue often shows up in your personal life before it appears at work. If you notice yourself withdrawing from friends or family, take it as an important signal that your well-being needs attention.

Reflection Activity

How are the relational effects of compassion fatigue impacting my connections with others?

Self-Check: Professional Symptoms

Compassion fatigue does not stop at the classroom door. It can influence your motivation, performance, and connection to your work.

Instructions: Read through the list below and check off any symptoms you have experienced, either now or in the past. Then, use the reflection space to explore how these symptoms are impacting you currently.

Professional Symptoms May Include:

- ☐ Decreased quality of work or reduced attention to detail
- ☐ Loss of motivation or enthusiasm for teaching
- ☐ Feeling detached or disconnected from colleagues
- ☐ Increased absenteeism or difficulty showing up consistently
- ☐ Reduced confidence in professional abilities
- ☐ Difficulty managing classroom responsibilities
- ☐ Questioning your career choice or sense of purpose
- ☐ Feeling like your work is never enough



Reflection Activity

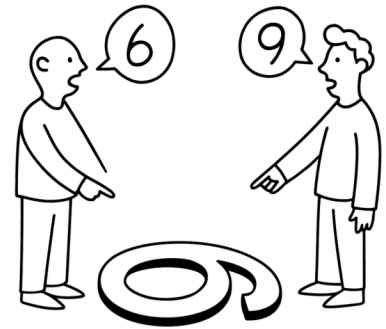


How are the professional effects of compassion fatigue impacting my work as an educator?

Compassion Fatigue vs Compassion Satisfaction

Compassion fatigue is real, but it is not the end of the story. The answer is not to care less, but to cultivate **compassion satisfaction**: the sense of purpose, fulfillment, and meaning that comes from making a difference in your students' lives.

Our brains are hard-wired to focus on the negative as a survival instinct. This means that exhaustion, frustration, or setbacks can easily take center stage, even when there are meaningful and positive moments happening all around us. The key is to shift our attention and focus toward the good. All it takes is intentional effort and repetition.



*Fatigue vs Satisfaction
It's a matter of perspective*

Practices That Build Compassion Satisfaction

- Take time to celebrate each win, no matter how small.
- Write down three things you are grateful for at the end of each day.
- Pause to ask yourself, "What's going right?"
- Keep a journal of meaningful student interactions.
- Share positive moments with a trusted colleague or friend.

When practiced consistently, these small shifts help train the brain to focus on the good, breaking negative thought patterns, cultivating optimism, and building resilience.

Reflection Activity

What practices can I commit to this week to begin building compassion satisfaction in my own life?

Other Ways to Combat Compassion Fatigue

In addition to building compassion satisfaction, there are many strategies that can help you reduce the impact of compassion fatigue and protect your well-being. None of these require perfection. Small, intentional steps make a real difference.

Strategies to Try:

Build awareness: Learn to recognize the signs and symptoms in yourself. Tools like the Professional Quality of Life Scale (proqol.org) can help you check in. Group discussions with trusted colleagues can also raise awareness and reduce stigma.

Set and maintain boundaries: Protect your personal time by saying “no” when necessary and respecting your own limits (for example, not giving your personal phone number out to parents).

Schedule time for yourself: Take your breaks, go for a walk, enjoy lunch away from work, and make time for hobbies that restore your energy. The important thing is to separate yourself from work mentally, not just physically.

Leave work at work: This can be hard to do, but creating a barrier between your work and home life is essential to your long-term well-being. A simple transition ritual at the end of the day can help your mind shift out of school mode.

Make space for reflection: Journaling, therapy, meditation, or even a few minutes of quiet time can help you process experiences and reset.

Cultivate your support network: Stay connected with friends, family, colleagues, and communities who remind you that you’re not alone.

Ask for help: Reaching out is a sign of strength, not weakness. Use the resources available to you.

Putting It Into Practice

The next section of this workbook will guide you through practical tools to put these strategies into action. You’ll find worksheets, planners, and reflection activities designed to help you recognize your needs, care for yourself consistently, and strengthen your resilience as an educator.

Reflect & Recharge Worksheet

Consider an event in your classroom that had an impact on you, positive or negative. Use the prompts below to process the experience. You may complete this privately or share it with a trusted friend/colleague if you choose.

Stage	Prompts	Response
Facts	What happened? Set judgements and feelings aside for the moment. Just describe the event in as much detail as you can recall.	
Feelings	How did this event make you feel, and why? What did you feel in the moment? What did you feel afterward? What contributed to those emotions?	
Meaning	Evaluate and analyze the event. What was positive or negative about the situation? What might have been going on beneath the surface for you or for your students?	
Conclusions	What personal conclusions can you draw from this event? If something similar happens in the future, what might you do differently or the same?	
Supports	What practices, habits, or personal supports (friends, colleagues, routines) could help me manage similar situations in the future?	

Circle of Wellness

Wellness is like a wheel. To keep moving forward, every part of the wheel needs attention. If one area is neglected, the wheel becomes unbalanced, making it harder to move smoothly through life and work.

Each domain of the circle represents an important part of your overall well-being. Think of these as spokes in the wheel. They all need some time and energy to keep you steady.

The Six Domains of Wellness

- **Body:** sleep, movement, nutrition, rest
- **Heart:** emotional support, boundaries, affirmations
- **Mind:** learning, creativity, focus, problem-solving
- **Connections:** friends, colleagues, family, social supports
- **Purpose:** professional growth, meaning, values in teaching
- **Renewal:** mindfulness, nature, spirituality, reflection

Quick Tip Balance does not mean giving equal time to every area every day. It means making sure none of the areas are ignored for too long.

Reflection Activity

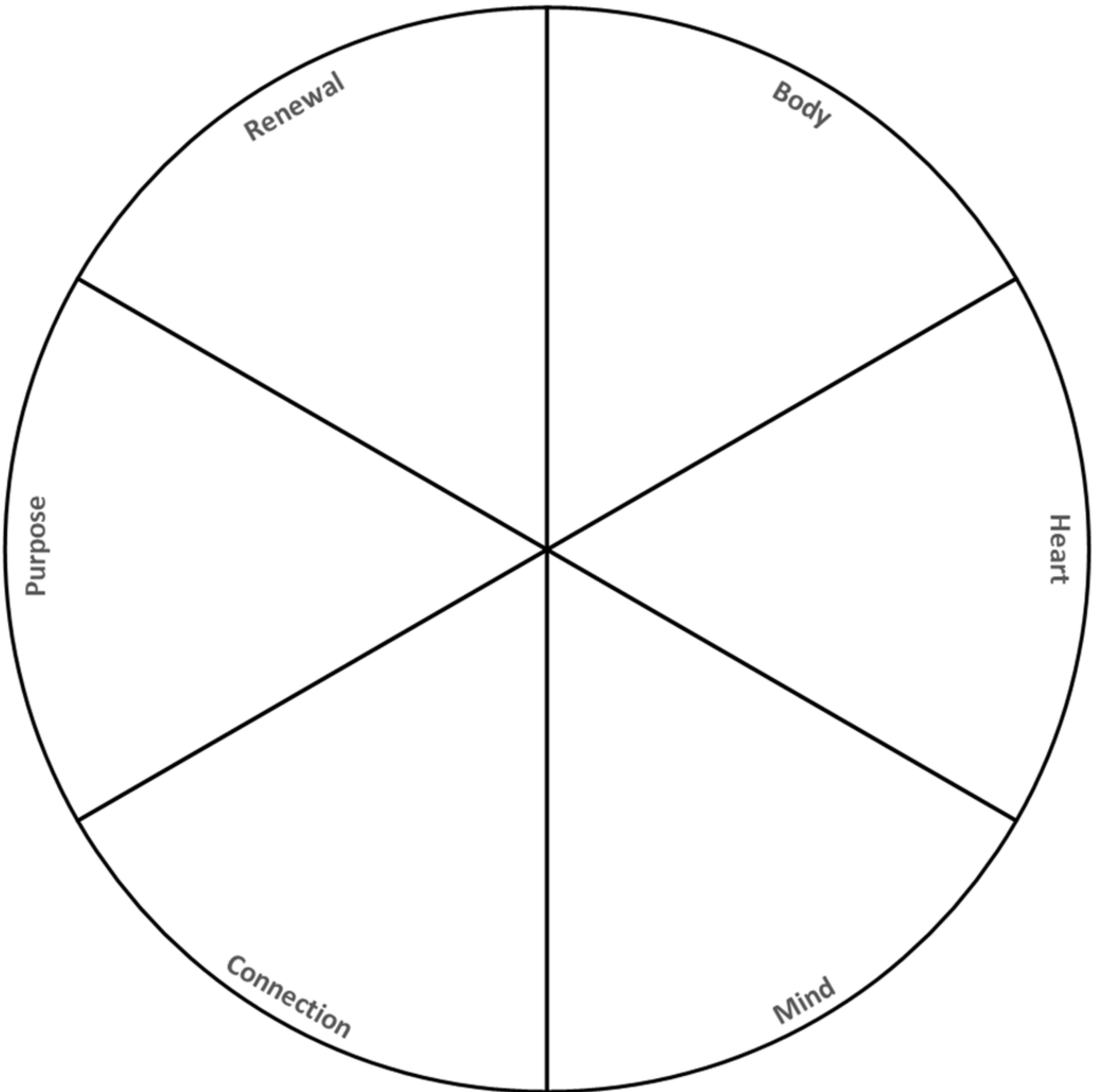
On the next page, you'll find a blank Circle of Wellness. Write or draw activities you currently use in each section of the wheel. Take your time filling it in. When you have finished, return to this page and reflect in the space below:

Is my wheel balanced, or are there aspects of my wellbeing that I have overlooked?

What are some activities I can do to balance my wheel?

My Circle of Wellness

Instructions: In each section of the wheel, write or draw activities you currently use to support that area of your wellness. Use this page to think about your balance across the six domains.



Weekly Self-Care Tools

Self-care does not have to be complicated. The most effective practices are often the small, consistent steps we take each day. When we care for ourselves regularly, we build the energy and resilience needed to show up fully for our students and for ourselves.

The next two tools are designed to work together. The Weekly Self-Care Checklist helps you stay consistent with daily practices, while the Weekly Self-Care Journal provides space to reflect on what those habits mean for your well-being. Used side by side, they create a simple rhythm of daily action and weekly reflection that supports resilience and renewal.

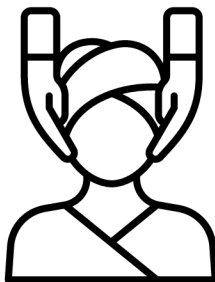
Weekly Self-Care Checklist

The checklist is a quick, at-a-glance way to track small, healthy practices each day. Checking off items like rest, hydration, movement, or connection helps you stay mindful of your self-care throughout the week. The act of tracking itself reinforces these habits, making them more likely to stick over time.

Quick Tip Start with one or two practices and build from there. Sustainable self-care is about progress, not perfection.

Weekly Self-Care Journal

The journal builds on the checklist by giving you space to process your experiences at the end of the week. Here, you can celebrate small wins, notice patterns, and set intentions for the week ahead. Research shows that reflecting on gratitude and progress not only boosts optimism but also strengthens long-term resilience.



Together, the checklist and journal create a cycle of action and reflection. This helps you to notice what works, adjust where needed, and carry your self-care forward with intention.

Weekly Self-Care Checklist

Week of: _____

Each day, check off the activities you complete. Start small, with a few tasks, and build from there. Use the last two rows to create your own wellness activities.

Small Wins	Su	M	Tu	W	Th	F	Sa
Get at least 7–8 hours of sleep							
Eat a nourishing breakfast or pack a healthy lunch							
Drink 8 glasses of water							
Step away from your desk and take a walk							
Pause to take 3 deep breaths before or after class							
Write down one positive moment from today							
Use one positive affirmation before starting the day							
Jam out to your favorite song on the drive to or from school							
Eat lunch with a coworker instead of at your desk							
Send a quick text or message to a loved one							
Share one positive student interaction with someone close							
Leave school within 30 minutes of contract time							
Avoid bringing work home							
Practice gratitude by listing 3 things you're thankful for							
Do one joyful activity just for yourself							
Read something you enjoy for 20 minutes							
Journal or reflect for 5 minutes after school							
Do something creative (drawing, music, crafts, cooking)							
Spend 15 minutes engaging in a hobby you enjoy							

Weekly Self-Care Journal

Over the weekend, use the prompts below to help you celebrate the good, process the bad, and set gentle intentions for the week ahead.

 **My Wins (Big or Small)** - What am I proud of this week?

 **Precious Moments** - What moments brought me joy, meaning, or connection?

 **What I Struggled With** - Where did I feel challenged or drained?

 **What Went Well** - Which habits, choices, and experiences supported my well-being?

 **My Plan for Next Week** - What small steps will I take to make next week better?

 **Gratitudes** - What were my top 3 gratitudes for the week?

 **My Affirmation** - What affirmation will I bring with me into next week?

My Self-Care Plan

Taking care of yourself is not selfish, it is essential. Use this page to set small, realistic goals you can commit to this month.

Two Self-Care Goals for This Month

1.

2.

Daily Reminder

A phrase or affirmation I want to carry with me into my classroom.

Support System

Which friends, family, or colleagues can I lean on when I need help?

Next Steps

What is one small action I can commit to this week to start my self-care journey?

Closing Reminder

The knowledge and tools in this workbook are designed to help you build a strong foundation for your self-care and overall well-being. Remember, self-care is not a one-time task; it is a lifelong journey. By recognizing the impact of compassion fatigue, practicing intentional reflection, and using the strategies in these pages, you have already taken important steps toward protecting your energy and sustaining your passion for teaching.

This framework will help guide you as you continue your journey, but you don't have to walk it alone.

For additional tools and resources, please visit:

www.themacrolens.etsy.com

www.teacherspayteachers.com/store/the-macro-lens

You can also connect with me directly through either storefront or through my website:

www.themacrolens.com

I welcome your feedback, questions, and ideas for future resources.

I will leave you with this quote from Henri Nouwen:

"Nobody escapes being wounded. We are all wounded people, whether physically, emotionally, mentally, or spiritually. The main question is not, 'How can we hide our wounds?' so we don't have to be embarrassed, but 'How can we put our woundedness in the service of others?' When our wounds cease to be a source of shame and become a source of healing, we have become wounded healers."

I see this as an important reminder. None of us are perfect. We are all flawed, wounded, human. Our ability to serve others is not in spite of our wounds, but because of them.

You don't have to be perfect to make a difference in the lives of your students. You just have to be your authentic self.

Digital Bonus: Printable Worksheets & Tools

Thank you for purchasing the Teacher Self-Care Workbook.

Your commitment to prioritizing your wellbeing is the first step toward creating a more balanced and sustainable classroom experience.

To download printable versions of every checklist, tracker, and reflection tool in this workbook, scan the QR code on this page or visit:

👉 <https://themacrolens.com/teacher-printables>

There you'll find:

- Printer-friendly PDFs of all workbook tools
- Exclusive bonus templates and reflection prompts
- New and updated teacher wellness resources as they're released

Need help accessing your downloads or have questions about educator self-care?

✉ Contact: hello@themacrolens.com

Keep taking care of yourself—the work you do matters.



Because your students deserve the best of you ***Not what's left of you***

Teaching is meaningful work, but it's also emotional labor.

Between lesson plans, meetings, and the constant pull to “do more,” it's easy to forget that educators are human too.

The Teacher Self-Care Workbook transforms self-care from another task on your to-do list into a structured practice of restoration.

Inside, you'll find:

- ✓ Guided reflection pages to process stress and re-center purpose
- ✓ Research-informed tools to recognize compassion fatigue early
- ✓ Weekly self-care checklists and habit trackers
- ✓ Practical strategies for boundaries, mindfulness, and gratitude
- ✓ Beautiful full-color visuals that make self-care engaging and restorative

Whether you read it during planning periods, at home, or with colleagues, this workbook helps you reconnect with why you began teaching—and how to keep that passion alive.



Joseph Wernau, LMSW, is a school social worker and founder of The Macro Lens, a platform equipping educators, nonprofits, social workers, and changemakers with tools that build wellness, equity, and systemic impact.

Learn more and access free resources at themacrolens.com.

