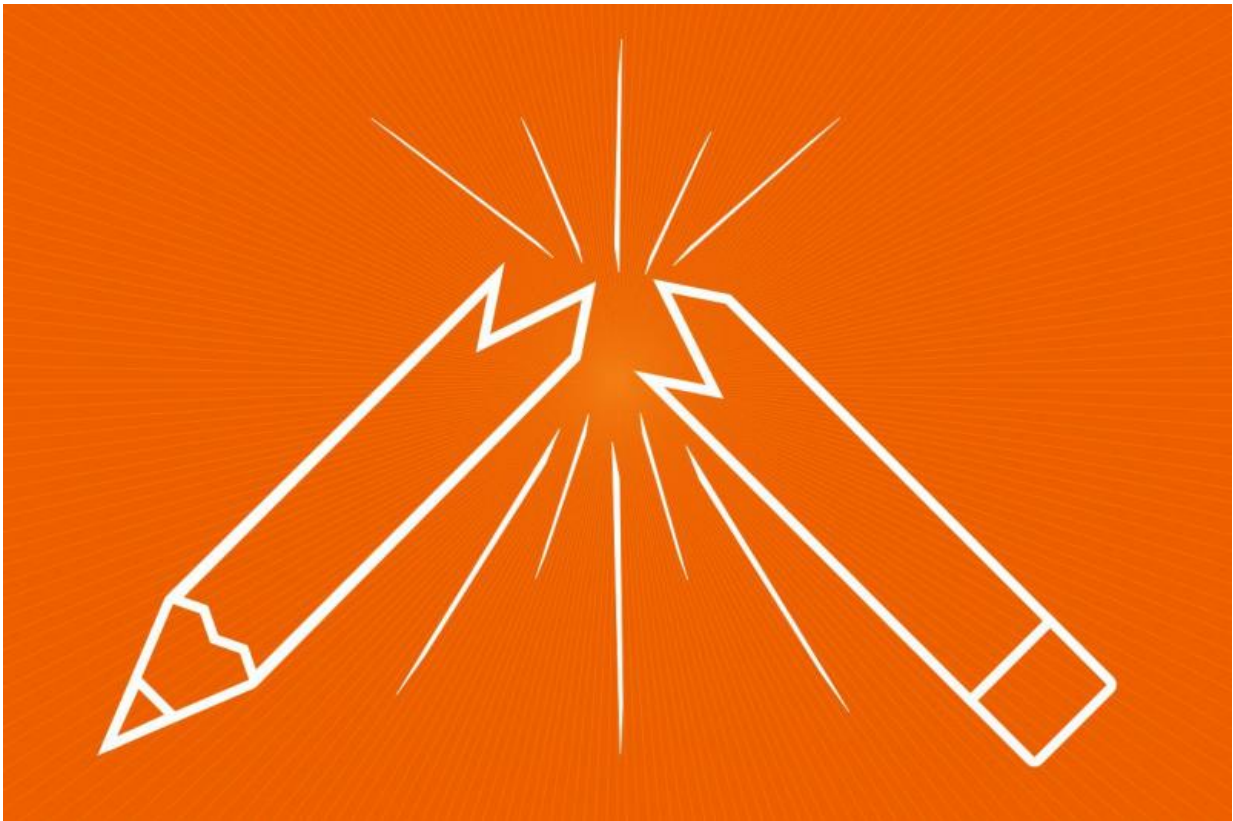


Study finds reducing teachers' stress leads to higher-quality classrooms

May 3 2016, by Audrey Breen



Teachers who regularly use stress-reducing strategies increase their abilities to cope with the demands of the career and are positioned to do a better job educating students, according to results from a program

administered by the University of Virginia's Curry School of Education.

Teachers in New York City public schools who participated in "Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education," or CARE, a mindfulness professional development program, not only felt an improvement in their own well-being, they also improved the quality of their [classroom](#).

"Today, many teachers are not well-prepared for the social and emotional demands of the classroom," Patricia "Tish" Jennings, associate professor and lead researcher on the study, said. "While spending a great amount of cognitive energy on the content of their lessons, teachers are also constantly managing a classroom of students, some of whom have difficulty attending to learning activities, sitting still or getting along with their peers."

For every teacher, these conditions increase anxiety, depression, emotional exhaustion, sleep problems and stress. What differs from teacher to teacher is how well they know and exercise the tools needed to cope with such a cognitive and emotionally demanding environment.

The CARE program's goal is to increase the well-being of participating teachers by providing them with specific skills and practices to better cope with classroom demands.

Over the school year, 224 teachers from 36 New York public elementary schools located in the Bronx and Upper Manhattan participated in a series of five six-hour sessions. Between sessions, teachers received individualized phone coaching through two 30-minute calls over two weeks. The program content consisted of: emotion skills instruction; mindfulness/stress reduction practices to promote self-regulation of attention and non-judgmental awareness; and caring and listening practices to promote empathy and compassion.

"We know that when teachers are aware of their increased stress in a particular moment, that awareness allows them to intentionally respond to that stress by taking small measures to de-escalate it," Jennings said. "When teachers can reduce stress, they can choose how best to respond to their class or an individual student."

The study, presented at the peer-reviewed American Educational Research Association annual conference, shows that CARE has significant positive impacts on teachers' well-being. It reduces personal distress and the stress associated with time pressure and improves emotion regulation. It also promotes mindfulness.

"Teachers who are able to reduce the level of stress they are experiencing have an improved ability to recognize a student's perspective and how their own judgments or biases are impacting their reaction to a student," Jennings said.

According to Jennings, improving well-being also can work against the cumulative effect of stress that often results in burnout and teachers leaving the profession. Current data shows that nearly 50 percent of new teachers leave the profession within their first five years of teaching.

The impact of participating in the CARE program went beyond each individual teacher. The study shows that those participating also improved the quality of their classrooms.

The participating teachers were observed using the Classroom Assessment Scoring System, or CLASS. The CLASS tool, created by Curry School Dean Robert Pianta, is an observational instrument used to assess classroom quality by effectively measuring teacher-student interactions.

The classrooms of the teachers who received CARE were rated as more

emotionally supportive compared to those who did not do the program. The interactions in the classroom were more emotionally positive and the teachers demonstrated greater sensitivity to their students' needs than controls.

According to a number of previous studies, improved elements of teacher practice as measured by the CLASS have known links to improved student learning.

"What's truly amazing about these findings is that CARE focuses entirely on teachers' own well-being and social and emotional skills," Jennings said. "It does not provide any training in classroom management or teaching strategies."

According to Jennings, this study is the first of its kind to demonstrate that mindfulness-based training can have significant impacts on observable dimensions of classroom interactions.

The study also showed the CARE program directly impacted students, as the students in the CARE classrooms were rated as more productive than those in the control group. CARE teachers made better use of instructional time, resulting in students being more involved in learning activities.

"The findings definitely suggest that mindfulness-based interventions can have 'downstream' effects on the classroom environment and on the students."

For her next project, Jennings is working to scale up CARE and take it into more New York City schools and other locations. She is also exploring adaptations of CARE for special populations, such as infant/toddler caregivers and special education [teachers](#).

Provided by University of Virginia

Citation: Study finds reducing teachers' stress leads to higher-quality classrooms (2016, May 3)
retrieved 14 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-05-teachers-stress-higher-quality-classrooms.html>

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