

Teachers Take Up New Tools To Battle Burnout

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The day-to-day challenges of K-12 classrooms aren't for the faint of heart. Teachers spend their salaries on classroom materials, and their leisure time on lesson plans and curriculum mapping. Pile on deep budget cuts, closer scrutiny of performance and the under funded guidelines of No Child Left Behind, and even the toughest teachers struggle - or look for another job.

Given the load today's teachers carry, the thought of adding a soft-skills curriculum may sound as appealing as the cafeteria's tuna surprise - but educators are celebrating.

"Teachers who practice the Compassionate or Nonviolent Communication (NVC) process discover surprising wellsprings of power," says Sura Hart, co-author of *The Compassionate Classroom* with Victoria Kindle Hodson. "They spend no more time on lessons than before, and they ride on higher levels of energy and optimism."

The key - bring relationships front and center, including the important relationship a teacher has with him or herself. With little to no personal time in their day, an educator's stress level can build quickly, especially when their needs for support or cooperation are not met. Jumping to strategies like punishment, blame, or anger are a far cry from relief.

By using self-empathy, a central component to the NVC process, teachers have permission to give attention to their own feelings and needs without wallowing in destructive patterns of self-pity, judgment, blame or criticism.

"Our feelings are important messengers, telling us when our needs are fulfilled and when they are not," say Hart and Hodson in *The Compassionate Classroom*. According to Hart and Hodson, the problem is when people focus only on their feelings, which can leave them disempowered or disconnected, particularly when they begin to label others as the "cause" of their distress.

The NVC process guides educators through self-empathy using three key stages:

Observations — objectively describe the action or strategy that triggered your feelings, absent of judgment or criticism ("When I hear Travis talking to Lydia while I'm trying to lead a lesson, and I know I've asked him to quiet down three times so far . . .");

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Feelings — link your observations to your own feelings, absent of evaluation or blame (“ . . . I feel frustrated . . .”);

Needs — link your feeling(s) to the need of yours that is met or not met by the action you’ve observed (“ . . . because my needs for cooperation, support, and learning are not met . . .”).

The empowerment comes in the absence of judgment, evaluation, or blame, which serve only to deplete energy and manifest tension, and more importantly moving beyond the expression of feelings to needs.

“Identifying our own needs empowers us to take action on our own behalf,” say Hart and Hodson. Once in touch with needs through self empathy, expressing doable requests to meet a need is an equally crucial component of the NVC process.

The Compassionate Classroom offers teachers interactive lessons and activities to expand their vocabulary of feelings and needs, utilize self-empathy, provide empathy to others, and understand how to make doable requests to get their needs met.

“One of the unique features of (NVC) is that it only takes one person who knows it to increase understanding and connection in communication,” said founder of the NVC process, Marshall Rosenberg. Self-empathy, even when practiced internally, improves a teacher’s relationship to his/her own needs, resulting in improved connection at any given moment between the teacher and all that takes place in their classroom.