



Nature Connection Supports Educator Health and Well-being

Educators and Stress

While teaching can be a highly meaningful and rewarding profession, it can also bring many challenges. These challenges can negatively affect well-being for educators and contribute to high rates of educator burnout and stress, with 58% of teachers reporting high levels of stress, 85% of teachers feeling their work-life imbalance affects their teaching ability and 30% of new teachers leaving the field by their fifth year of teaching.¹ Educators take on so much more than teaching curriculum, navigating daily learner interactions and offering social and emotional support for their students. 35% of children experience more than one type of traumatic event in their childhood and this can lead to educators experiencing secondary trauma along with emotional and physical tolls while supporting learners.²

Educator stress levels have an impact not only on an educator's own life but also on the lives of their learners. Research shows that teacher well-being has a significant impact on student well-being³ and "teachers are the most important school-related factor impacting student learning".⁴ Additionally, when educators find a strong sense of meaning in their teaching practice and demonstrate care for their learners,

¹ Wright, J. (2023). The Burnout is real: Why We Can't Afford to Ignore Teacher Wellbeing. EdCan Network.

² Minero, E. (2017). When Students Are Traumatized, Teachers Are Too. <https://www.edutopia.org/article/when-students-are-traumatized-teachers-are-too/>

³ Roffey, S. (2012). Pupil Well-being - Teacher well-being: Two sides of the same coin? Educational & Child Psychology, 29(4), 8-17.

⁴ Hannon, V. (2023). Towards an Education Workforce Dedicated to Human Flourishing: What Professional Development Do Our Leaders and Teachers Need? OECD.

this increases students' well-being, self-esteem and school engagement.⁵ Happy and healthy teachers who are positively engaged with their teaching practice have a positive impact on their students.

Traditional professional development for educators is often based on teaching strategies and does not always support long-term changes in teaching practices.⁶ Professional development that does not center individual teacher experience or well-being contributes to “forgetfulness that what matters deeply in the situated world of the classroom is how the teachers’ ‘doings’ flow from who they are, their beings.”⁷

Nature Connection Reduces Stress and Increases Health and Well-being

It is now widely recognized that nature connection positively impacts our health and well-being and that spending time in nature is restorative.⁸ Shinrin-yoku or Forest Bathing has been shown to improve mood and decrease anxiety, anger and depression, decrease the risk of psychological stress-related diseases and improve human immune function⁹, as well as increase heart rate variability and compassion for self and others.¹⁰ Being in nature for at least 120 minutes a week is associated with good health and well-being¹¹ and studies reveal that being outdoors lowers the stress hormone cortisol.¹²

Experiencing nature connectedness or having a strong psychological or emotional connection with nature also positively impacts well-being.¹³ Research supports that a sense of wellness experienced through our personal relationship with nature, including nature connection and feeling passionate about environmental causes, increases wellness and helps us feel more aligned with our own guiding principles.¹⁴ Author Richard Louv coined the term Nature-Deficit Disorder and writes that “a

⁵ Lavy, S. and Naama-Ghanayim, E. (2020). Why care about caring? Linking teachers' caring and sense of meaning at work with students' self-esteem, well-being, and school engagement. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, Volume 91.

⁶ Brown, B., Friesen, S., Beck, J., & Roberts, V. (2020). Supporting New Teachers As Designers of Learning. *Education Sciences*, 10(207), 1-14.

⁷ Aoki, T. (1991). Teaching As Indwelling Between Two Curriculum Worlds. In T. Aoki (Ed.), *Inspiring Curriculum and Pedagogy: Talks to Teachers* (pp. 7-10). Department of Secondary Education, University of Alberta.

⁸ Hartig T., Mang M., Evans G. W. (1991). Restorative effects of natural environmental experiences. *Environ. Behav.* 23 3–26. 10.1177/0013916591231001

⁹ Li, Qing. (2010) Effect of Forest Breathing Trips on Human Immune Function. *Environ Health Prev Med*, 2010 Jan; 15(1): 9–17.

¹⁰ McEwan et al, 2021 A Pragmatic Controlled Trial of Forest Bathing Compared with Compassionate Mind Training in the UK: Impacts on Self-Reported Wellbeing and Heart Rate Variability. *Sustainability* 2021, 13(3), 1380

¹¹ White, M., Alcock I., Grellier, J, Wheeler, B., Hartig, T., Warber, S., Bone, A., Depledge, M. & Fleming, L. (2019) Spending at least 120 minutes a week in nature is associated with good health and wellbeing. *Scientific Reports* (2019) 9:7730 <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-019-44097-3>

¹² Gidlow, C. J., Randall, J., Gillman, J., Smith, G. R., & Jones, M. V. (2016). Natural environments and chronic stress measured by hair cortisol. *Landscape and Urban Planning*, 148, 61-67. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landurbplan.2015.12.009>

¹³ Richardson, M. et al (2021). Moments, Not Minutes: The nature-wellbeing relationship. *International Journal of Wellbeing*. Vol. 11 No. 1.

¹⁴ Reese, Ryan. (2013). *EcoWellness: Construction & Validation of the Reese EcoWellness Inventory*. The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

widening circle of researchers believes that the loss of habitat, or the disconnection from nature even when it is available, has enormous implications for human health” and that researchers have found that “the quality of exposure to nature affects our health at an almost cellular level.”¹⁵ In addition, the latest research shows that an encounter with any animal (wild or domestic) and “our relationships with the other-than-human beings can also have a profoundly positive impact on our health, our spirit, and our sense of inclusiveness in the world.”¹⁶

In a study on stress recovery rates, participants recovered from stress more quickly and completely when exposed to natural environments, further supporting the restorative influence of nature.¹⁷ Furthermore, stress can be reframed as an opportunity which doesn’t have to be perceived negatively. If someone believes they can manage it, stress can feel more like a positive challenge and the latest research demonstrates that how someone chooses to respond to what they are facing impacts how stressed they ultimately feel.¹⁸

Indigenous Ways of Knowing and connecting to the Land support health and well-being. Constantly interacting with the Land “by knowing it with all five senses, guides individuals and provides what is needed to lie in harmony with the environment, with each other and oneself. The reciprocal and dialogic relationship with nature provides not only the material needs but the ethical, moral, and spiritual underpinnings of living a good life.”¹⁹ Richelle North Star Scott writes that “as an Indigenous teacher, I believe that when we teach from the heart and the spirit, we are not only taking care of the students in our classroom, but we are taking care of ourselves” and that “having a positive relationship with yourself means having a deep relationship with the Earth.”²⁰

When practiced in combination with connecting to nature, mindfulness and gratitude can be incredibly restorative for educators. Mindfulness practices have been found to be beneficial in substantially reducing stress, along with depression and anxiety.²¹ Gratitude has been found to be foundational to well-being throughout

¹⁵ Louv, R. (2010). *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*. New York: Atlantic Books.

¹⁶ Louv, R. (2019). *Our Wild Calling: How Connecting with Animals Can Transform Our Lives- and Save Theirs*. New York: Workman Publishing.

¹⁷ Ulrich, R. S., Simons, R. F., Losito, B. D., Fiorito, E., Miles, M. A., & Zelson, M. (1991). Stress recovery during exposure to natural and urban environments. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 11(3), 201-230. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0272-4944\(05\)80184-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0272-4944(05)80184-7)

¹⁸ Taitz, J. (2024). *Stress Resets: How to Soothe Your Body and Mind in Minutes*. New York: Hachette Book Group, Inc.

¹⁹ Radu, I., House, L. and Pashagumskum, E.I. (2014). Life, land and knowledge in Chisasibi: Intergenerational healing in the bush, *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society*, 3(3), 86-105.

²⁰ Scott, R.N.S., Lawson, J et al. (2022). *Teacher, Take Care: A Guide to Well-being and Workplace Wellness for Educators*. Portage and Main Press.

²¹ Schreiner, I. and Malcolm, J.P. (2012). *The Benefits of Mindfulness Meditation: Changes in Emotional States of Depression, Anxiety, and Stress*. Cambridge University Press.

a human's lifespan²² and in Indigenous Ways of Knowing "gratitude expresses deep interconnectedness as a responsibility of authentic caring and reciprocity."²³

If outdoor learning is brought into their teaching practice, educators can experience an increase in job satisfaction, collaboration and community-building. A recent study demonstrated that educators who engage in outdoor learning with their learners have a higher average rate of well-being than their peers who do not.²⁴

In conclusion, for educators, nature connection can be deeply restorative; offer opportunities for self-care, self-compassion and stress reduction; improve resiliency to stressful challenges; as well as contribute to a renewed sense of meaning in their life and teaching practice.

²² Emmons, R.A. and Mishra, A. (2011). *Why Gratitude Enhances Well-Being: What We Know, What We Need to Know*. Designing Positive Psychology: Taking Stock and Moving Forward. Oxford University Press.

²³ Topa, W. (Four Arrows) and Narvaez, D. (2022). *Restoring the Kinship Worldview: Indigenous Voices Introduce 28 Precepts for Rebalancing Life on Planet Earth*. Huichin, unceded Ohlone land, Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books.

²⁴ Deschamps, A., Scrutton, R., Ayotte-Beaufet, J-P. (2022). School-based Outdoor Education and Teacher Subjective Well-being: An Exploratory Study. *Front. Educ., Sec. Educational Psychology*, Volume 7 - 2022.

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<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/behaviour-change/article/abs/benefits-of-mindfulness-meditation-changes-in-emotional-states-of-depression-anxiety-and-stress/16CEFE3661C9173067A32827CE8F6010>
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