



[« 12 Critical Issues in Education Due to the Coronavirus](#) | [Main](#) | [Too Much, Too Quick? The New Educational World of COVID-19](#) »

How to Find Resilience During This Difficult Time

By [Peter DeWitt](#) on March 26, 2020 7:40 AM



Today's guest blog is written by Nancy Willard, M.S., J.D., the author of *Be Positively Powerful: A Guide for Teens on Achieving Resilience and Empowerment* and *Engage Students to Embrace Civility*.

This blog presents practical, research-based strategies for how educators can gain greater resilience in the face of the toxic stress of these times. I wrote this blog in response to what I was seeing on several teacher Facebook groups—which was clear evidence that many of the teachers who were posting or commenting were experiencing traumatic distress.

One of the best sources of information about toxic stress in childhood is a document produced by [Harvard University's Center on the Developing Child](#). From this document:

Learning how to cope with adversity is an important part of healthy child development. When we are threatened, our bodies prepare us to respond by increasing our heart rate, blood pressure, and stress hormones, such as cortisol. When a young child's stress response systems are activated within an environment of supportive relationships with adults, these physiological effects are buffered and brought back down to baseline. The result is the development of healthy stress response systems. However, if the stress response is extreme and long-lasting, and buffering relationships are unavailable to the child, the result can be damaged, weakened systems and brain architecture, with lifelong repercussions.

This describes the challenges of toxic stress that your students, their families, and you are now experiencing. The only people in our society who are facing greater toxic stress are the medical professionals, who in addition to this toxic stress, have inadequate protection gear, are facing risk of serious illness or death, and are currently making their wills and plans for their children.

Your cortisol level is elevated, likely also your heart rate and blood pressure. This is likely resulting in problems focusing and sleeping. This may cause you to be more likely to trigger and get upset more easily. This is also reducing your immunity—which at this time is not good.

The goal of this article is to provide strategies you can use to help bring yourself down to baseline so that you can be there for your students and not suffer traumatic distress of your own.

Another very helpful [quote](#) from the Harvard toxic-stress document is:

Research has identified a common set of factors that predispose children to positive outcomes in the face of significant adversity. Individuals who demonstrate resilience in response to one form of adversity may not necessarily do so in response to another. Yet when these positive influences are operating effectively, they "stack the scale" with positive weight and optimize resilience across multiple contexts. These counterbalancing factors include:

1. facilitating supportive adult-child relationships;
2. building a sense of self-efficacy and perceived control;
3. providing opportunities to strengthen adaptive skills and self-regulatory capacities; and

4. mobilizing sources of faith, hope, and cultural traditions.

These four counterbalancing factors form the basis for the following guidance. There are seven strategies that appear to be most helpful. These strategies are also outlined in my new book: [Be Positively Powerful: A Guide for Teens on Achieving Resilience and Empowerment](#).

Make Positive Connections

For teens, my guidance is to make positive connections with friends and with trusted adults. For educators, the focus must be on positive connections with friends and colleagues. Do a "friendship audit." Write down the people you can connect with—the ones who uplift you. Whenever you start to feel stressed, stop and take the time to connect with a friend.

Reach Out to Be Kind

The act of reaching out to be kind brings as many benefits to the doer as to the one who received such kindness. The [Random Acts of Kindness Foundation](#) website is the "go to" resource for ideas on kindness, especially for educators. Strive to intentionally reach out to be kind at least five times a day. Specifically reach out to anyone who appears to be distressed. Note how this person felt in response. Note also how this made you feel.

Use Your Strengths

The [VIA Institute on Character](#) presents 24 character traits that social-science researchers from throughout the world agreed provide the foundation for human goodness across all cultures, nations, and beliefs. Everyone has different strengths. On their site, you can complete a survey to find out what your top strengths are. They have done research that documents that intentionally using one of your strengths a day can bring an increase in happiness.

Complete the survey to find your top strengths. Intentionally use one of your strengths every day. For a good measure, intentionally use one of your strengths several times a day and pick a new strength you want to develop and intentionally use this strength. When trying to figure out how to resolve a problem, identify a possible strategy using each of your top strengths.

Focus on the Good

Rick Hanson is the author of the book *Hardwiring Happiness*. You can watch a [TedTalk](#) of his approach. Dr. Hanson's approach is to: Have a good experience or note when you are. Take time to enrich this by focusing on the good. Then, absorb the good feelings into your body. While you are absorbing this good feeling, quickly bring to mind something that is bothering you and then let the good feeling overcome the negative.

Strive throughout the day to focus on the good. In the morning, upon waking, reflect on something good that happened the day before or that you plan for this day. In the evening, write down the good things that happened. Write letters of gratitude.

Be Mindful

Practicing mindfulness in a consistent manner is the best way to reduce the excess

cortisol in your body and reduce stress. There are some good free apps you can download. There are a number of great organizations. [Mindful.org](#). [Mindfulness in Schools](#). [Positive Psychology](#). [UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center](#). [Center for Mindfulness and Compassion](#).

Practice mindfulness for an extended time several times a day. Whenever you change activities, take a minute to breathe deeply and achieve calm. Take the time to study about how to integrate mindfulness activities in your school. This will be imperative for next year.

Keep Your Personal Power

There are two aspects to this. One is physical presence. Maintaining a powerful physical presence can provide you with greater feelings of personal power. Watch Amy Cuddy's video on [Power Posing](#). Then, take the time to watch the video of Elsa singing [Let It Go](#). Note when she shifts from a powerless presence to powerful presence. It is time for all teachers to take on more power for how things are proceeding in schools.

The second aspect of keeping your personal power is knowing that bad consequences are not caused by the things that happen to us. We cannot control what happens. We can control how we feel about ourselves and respond. This is the work of Dr. Ellis, [Rational Emotive Therapy](#). The A B C approach. A is the adversity you cannot control. B is your beliefs that you can control. C is the consequence.

Throughout the day, note your physical posture and take the time to achieve a position of more personal power. Do this especially in advance of any staff meetings, especially if there are any challenging issues to deal with. Realize that everyone is facing an adverse situation over which none of us has any control.

Print out the Serenity/Courage/Wisdom prayer. Grant me the Serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the Courage to change the things I can, the Serenity to accept what I cannot change, and the Wisdom to know the difference.

Think Things Through

As an educator, you already have good problem-solving skills. Now is the time to insist on using those skills together with your colleagues to develop strategies within your school and district to address these challenges. To get through these difficulties, it is going to be imperative that schools shift from operating in an authoritarian manner, where the school leaders make all of the decisions, to a more democratic operational approach. All educators will need to increase their skills in group decisionmaking. It is also important to know that first decisions may not end up being effective. This is to be expected and is perfectly OK and necessary to try a strategy and conclude this is not effective. This is not failure; this is life.

To engage in effective problem-solving ask: What is the situation? What do we want to accomplish? What strategies could we use? Is each in accord with our values and the standards that we must comply with? For each, what might happen? What is the best first choice or choices? How should we proceed? Did this work? What else could or should we do?

Nancy Willard, M.S., J.D., is the director of [Embrace Civility in the Digital Age](#). She is the author of [Be Positively Powerful: A Guide for Teens on Achieving Resilience and Empowerment](#) and [Engage Students to Embrace Civility](#). More resources for educators on addressing trauma and toxic stress during the Covid-19 pandemic are on her [Be Positively Powerful](#) website.