

VAI EDUCATION SPOTLIGHT

Find Your Heart: 7 Ways to Reclaim Your Love of Teaching

If you feel like this year has been more stressful, more overwhelming, and more difficult to find the joy of teaching than ever before, you're not alone. With pandemic protocols, political unrest, and increasing workloads and responsibilities ravishing the classroom, the heart of teaching can at times feel lost. It doesn't have to be this way though. Let's face it, many of these things are not under our control. If we hope to reignite our passion for teaching, we're going to need to put them aside and focus on what we can change.



What You CANNOT Control

Let's start by acknowledging those unavoidable stressors/constraints that impact your work daily:

- COVID protocols and everything pandemic related
- Time in a day
- Political divisiveness
- Testing requirements
- Report cards
- Teacher evaluations
- Class sizes
- Budget
- Attendance
- Student home life

This is by no means an exhaustive list and it is important to recognize the impacts these have on what you do every day, but for the next few moments, let's push these aside and focus on the one thing that you can control: *you*.

Six Universal Emotional Needs

According to Cloe Madanes (2016), leading expert in family therapy, humans strive to meet these six basic emotional needs for fulfillment:

✓ Certainty/Comfort <i>Need to feel secure, safe, stable</i>	✓ Uncertainty/Variety <i>Need for unpredictable outcomes</i>
✓ Significance <i>Need to feel important, valued, wanted</i>	✓ Connection <i>Need for togetherness, unity, love</i>
✓ Growth <i>Need for progress, new learning, success</i>	✓ Contribution <i>Need to make a positive impact on others</i>

When our need for connection, growth, and contribution are met, they tend to encompass all of the other needs. Based on those "big three" emotional needs, here are seven ways, along with practical strategies, to help you focus on you and re-discover your love for the greatest profession in the world!

7 Ways to Reclaim Your Love of Teaching

1. Give Yourself Grace (Connection): The idea of self compassion, the realization that suffering, failures, and imperfections are all part of being human, seems quite obvious. Unfortunately, it is not. Often times we get stuck in the “supposed to” trap. “I was supposed to do better.” Or, “I was supposed to be better.” Remembering we are not alone and this is a shared human experience makes an incredible difference. How will you be kind to yourself today?

- **Grace Journal:** Record the incident, difficult emotion, or inadequacy you experienced. Then write a few sentences to yourself from the perspective of a caring and compassionate friend. What would this caring friend say about this perceived inadequacy?
- **Being Kind to You List:** Create a list of everything that makes you energized, recharged (socializing, exercising, reading, learning something new, etc.). When feeling low, do one of those activities and reflect on your mood after.

2. Exude Kindness (Connection/Contribution): [Research has found](#) that acts of kindness can increase happiness, energy, and optimism while decreasing stress, anxiety, and pain.

Teachers are always thinking outside of themselves and modeling kindness for their students. Let’s encourage those around us to do the same.



- **Kindness Challenges:** Encourage your staff and/or students to participate in challenges such as [Kindness Bingo](#).
- **Projects that Matter:** Consider engaging your students in authentic learning experiences where they learn the content while making the world a better place. Check out [Blue Apple projects](#) and [free resources](#) for ideas to make this happen.

3. Practice Mindfulness (Growth): [Research suggests](#) that mindfulness decreases rumination, stress and emotional reactivity while boosting working memory and cognitive flexibility. The goal of mindfulness is to be more aware of the present rather than rehashing the past or imagining the future. It is acknowledgment of your thoughts without judgment.

Consider taking a few minutes out of each day to engage in a quick mindfulness technique. Sometimes just a few minutes can make all the difference!

- **4 Square Breathing:** Breathe in for 4 seconds. Hold for 4 seconds. Breathe out for 4 seconds. Hold for 4 seconds.
- **5, 4, 3, 2, 1 Grounding:** Use your senses to bring you to the present. Identify 5 things you see, 4 things you hear, 3 things you touch, 2 things you smell, 1 thing you taste.
- **Mindful Walking:** Choose a flat, open path of 10-20 paces. Walk at a comfortable pace. Intentionally feel the changing sensations in your feet and legs. Feel contact with the ground. If your mind wanders, let it return back to walking. When you are done, stand still and recognize the new neutral position. Repeat.
- **Mindfulness Apps:** Check out this [article of mindfulness apps](#) that can help you focus in the present.

4. Reframe the Negative (Growth): It’s all too easy for your mind to get swamped by negative thoughts. With a few intentional changes, you can save yourself emotional distress and keep on a path towards a healthy response as opposed to an emotional reaction.

- **Stay Away From Toxic Complainers:** Those people that only share negativity without any potential solutions can be emotionally draining.
- **Replace “Could’s” and “Should’s.”** “I could have...” and “I should have...” is not helpful. Replace those thoughts with “I learned...”, “or next time I will...”.
- **Avoid Toxic Positivity:** Toxic positivity imposes that positivity is the only solution to problems. However, it is important to recognize that negative emotions are normal. Be sure to talk with nonjudgmental people and avoid always trying to have a positive response.
- **Make Saying “No” More Positive:** Turn those into more positive interactions by using these types of frames: “Because my plate is full right now, I can’t say yes...”. “Thanks so much for thinking of me, but I can’t say yes at this time...”.

- **Reframing Journal:** Identify/isolate the negative thought and write it down. Determine its distress level (0-10). Challenge thought and replace it with a positive counterpart. Then, reevaluate the distress level.
 - *Negative Self-Talk:* “I am so overwhelmed. I have too much on my plate and my teaching is suffering.”
 - *Positive Counterpart:* “I have the choice to make a change. There is only so much I can do in a day. Let’s make it matter.”

5. Set YOUR Goals (Growth): It is so easy to lose sight of your personal and professional goals as demands of the day-to-day take priority. Remember that your profession is also about you and what makes you tick as a teacher.

- **Choose Your PD:** Seek out PD opportunities that matter to you. Find like-minded educators on Twitter or other social media outlets. Here is a [list of a few education twitter chats](#) to start with. Conferences are not your only avenue for PD, so be creative. [EdCamps](#), [book studies](#), and [webinars](#) are great places to find PD that is financially and logistically feasible. And remember to share what you are doing. Teachers want to hear from you!
- **Smart Goals:** Use the [SMART Goal protocol](#) to help you create specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and timely goals.
- **The Big 3:** Identify the 3 tasks each day (or week) that significantly contribute to the progress of achieving your goals.

- 6. Celebrate Your Successes (Contribution):** It is so important to reflect and celebrate your many accomplishments. These include those huge milestones (i.e. receiving an advanced degree) or smaller scale, but nonetheless incredible, achievements (i.e. effectively redirecting a negative behavior). You have so much awesome to recognize and share!
- **Feel Good Folder:** Keep a folder of the heart-

warming letters and cards from your students. Read a few of them when you need a “pick me up.”

- **Success Jar:** Write your successes on slips of paper. Pull one or two out of the jar from time to time as a reminder of how awesome you are!
- **Share Your Awesome:** Teachers want to hear from you. Consider [presenting at conferences and workshops](#). If you are on social media, share what you are doing. We all love to hear from each other--we truly are better together!

7. Be You and Have Fun (Connection, Growth, Contribution): It is so important to remember who you are. What makes you a passionate teacher? What makes you look forward to welcoming your students every day? Have you planned for having fun?

- **Do What Makes You a Passionate Teacher:** Don’t try to be something you are not. Find what you are passionate about. Reflect on your favorite lessons. What makes them your favorite?
- **Bring in Props/Dress Up:** Add a costume, hat or prop that ties into the lesson you are teaching. Or, have a different hat for different activities. (i.e. reflection, collaboration). You can also connect your props to the [six thinking hats](#).
- **Play Games:** Nothing brings out the kid in us all more than good, old-fashioned game time. Consider the games you play right now. Do they need a refresh? Can you bring them in more? Try out this online tool for customizing a [Scattergories](#) game for your students or if you have the physical dice, use that and have the categories on the screen in a Google Slide. Check out these customizable templates from the [Gameshow Classroom](#) to help bring in a little competition and fun!
- **Laugh More:** “Humor can foster learning by building an emotional connection that strengthens memory, and therefore can help you understand and retain information.” (Advances in Mind Body Medicine, 2014). Curate funny memes/videos and find time in your day to take a “Laugh Break.” Journaling is a great tool for so many feelings and emotions, including laughter. Quickly jot down something that made you laugh in a “Laughter Journal.” Refer back to this whenever you need to bring a bit more laughter to your life.

MOMENTS TO Remember



Project-based learning is an incredible way to connect, grow, and contribute to a greater purpose, all while teaching the content you need to teach. If you'd like to try a project-based learning experience that helps students make meaningful connections, check out [Moments to Remember](#), where students form a friendship with a senior citizen, then use what they've learned about their new friend to craft a biography they will cherish forever! This project includes all of the resources needed to bring it to life in your classroom and is connected to content standards in ELA, Math, Science, and Social Studies.

- This [Project Overview](#) provides a lesson by lesson summary of this project.
- Here is a [book list](#) of rich, diverse literature on the topic of memories and connections.
- Check out [K-8 content standard connections](#) for this project.
- To see this project in action, check out the [project video](#).

Conclusion

While the road ahead may be daunting, I'm confident that we can overcome any obstacle when we work together to support one another. So, take a moment and take a breath. You are not alone in this journey, and even when things seem out of your control, there's still much that you can do. Remember to be kind to yourself in the coming months. Your passion for education hasn't left you, all it needs is a little spark!

[Click here](#) if you would like to see a 30-minute webinar presentation of this content:
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