

Our Mental Health as Early Years Teachers

-Written by Barbra McLean ECE/CCRR Consultant

Caring for children is a demanding job. Days are filled with connecting with parents, regulating behavior, meeting needs, solving problems and basic day to day care. The demands are high and often the thanks low. Keeping our mental health is key to keeping our quality of care high. It can be easy to fall into patterns of reacting to behaviors, making assumption on behaviors and start to have a negative outlook on our day and the interactions we have through it.

I think every teacher has a desire to be the best they can be. We love to help, and provide for others. It is why we do the work we do. Our hearts are filled with tiny hands that pull us across room to “look and come see”, small arms wrapped in tight hugs around our necks and smiles and grins that tell us we are loved and important in the lives of the children we care for and teach. We laugh with them when we see the world through their eyes, and see the reactions they have to things they think funny. We hurt when we see the hurts they feel, and rejoice in the times they succeed and grow. We dance, we sing and we play. These are the moments that we say “I love this Job”.

But what about the bad days? The days that seem filled with one fire after another. The days filled with high energy, low tolerance, negative thoughts and reactive behaviors. These are the days that call on us to dig deep and find our inner teacher to come to the call. But what if our inner teacher is sick? What happens when we are not regulated? When our mental reserves get low, and energy is low, but the demands come to us high, what happens then? These are times that we find ourselves quick to anger, frustration and start to blame the behaviors of others as the reason for our un-regulation. However, would that be the case if we had done the preventative work and taken care of our mental health before things got hard?

Being aware of our own bodies is a key part to taking care of our own mental health. As caregivers we are notorious for putting our own needs aside to give others what they want/need. We often see the need to help others around us, even if it means putting our own wants and needs to the side; we tell



ourselves we are just taking care of those who need us, but in truth we are avoiding filling our own needs as it may feel vulnerable and raw. Often self-care can seem more daunting and harder to do. Guilt can be a factor as we take time to care for ourselves, we feel like we are neglecting others to do so. This thinking however, is not healthy for us or for those we care for. When you get on a plane, the flight attendant walks you thru the emergency procedures. The main one, is in the event of cabin pressure changing the oxygen masks will come down. We are all told to first put on your own mask before you offer help to others. As care providers, the same goes. Take care of your own mental health and physical self, so you can care for others.

No matter how well you have programed your curriculum, no matter how many tools and skills as a teacher you have, it will be all for not if you are suffering and unregulated in your mental health. Thinking of our mental health as the most important component of self-care is the first step to becoming stronger, healthier and more regulated teachers, mothers/fathers, spouses and community members. Guiding and teaching children daily is a practice that involves educating children and families about emotional and social regulation. In fact this is the ground work of our work. Regulated teachers with high social emotional IQ's can teach and role model these skills to children and families. Regulated teachers also have a higher ability to understand behaviors and the best way to respond to them. To be a regulated teacher, your mental health must be

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cared for on a daily basis. It is a daily practice that takes effort and intention.

So now that we know why caring for our mental health is so important, how do we do it?

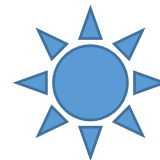
Starting with the simple things is a good place to start. Being intentional with our day to day practices, and checking in with ourselves to see how we are doing.

1. **Being true to ourselves and self-evaluation:** Take time to do a self-check in. How are you feeling? Are you feeling happy? Or are you feeling run down and sad? What are your feelings and emotions? True reflection of our own feelings and emotions allows us to explore why we feel the way we feel.
2. **Journal daily/weekly:** Take the time to write down your emotions, feelings and thoughts. Do this any way that works best for you. Write it down, type it out, verbalize it in a voice record...or just talk it out loud. The point of this practice is to externalize your thoughts and gives way to understanding them more. This practice should be done with no thought to who will read it, or hear it. It can be raw and uncensored. The point is to get the thoughts and emotions out. Once out we can take a better look at them, decide what needs our attention and what may be just emotional reaction. You will be surprised how much better things seem, feel and look when you get all the emotions out.
3. **Set-up Counselling Sessions:** Talking to a non-biased party that can help lead us through the quagmire of our emotions and feelings is a great way to care for our mental health. It allows an outlet, as well gives a safe space to work out the issues we struggle with. In addition counselling is an excellent way to grow our own social-emotional IQ's. Counselling is not something to do just when things get prickly

and unbearable. When used as a tool for mental health care it can be an asset in prevention and strengthening your energy and wellbeing.

4. **Exercise:** It is free and it works wonders in balancing your mental health. Walking, bike riding, running, hiking whatever your choice of activity try to get in at least 15 minutes a day.
5. **Meditation:** This can be done in a short few minutes or a longer session. The goal is to let your mind rest and relax.
6. **Healthy Diet and Lifestyle:** What we put in our bodies has a lot to do with how well it works. Be sure you get lots of water, your brain needs it to function. Eat fresh foods, avoiding processed items full of sugar, and get consistent rest each night.

When we look at our Mental Health as the main focus and first step in our overall health, we have already started on the path of good self-care. Being intentional in our self-care, and looking to understand and grow our skills in our own emotional self-regulation will help us to be better and happier teachers.



Need some help? Please reach out to us for more information on local mental health support and childcare provider support at ccrr@comserv.bc.ca