

## The Importance of Self-Care in Inclusive Learning Environments

Most of us have a routine for self-care. We have our gardens. We have yoga and meditation rituals. We go for walks. We press snooze. We even have boundaries, because we know how our minds and bodies respond to stress and anxiety. We have to imagine that our students feel the same traumas that we do. They are equally scared, angry, frustrated, disappointed or confused by what's happening in the world. In addition to the world's problems, our students don't always know how to effectively cope with their own life's difficulties, especially if they come from underserved and underrepresented marginalized communities of color. While self-care has always been an essential part of holistic living and learning, it is even more needed during a global pandemic that continuously transforms how we approach diversity, equity, and inclusion in academia.

There are too many practices for self-care to list here, but I suggest sharing some of the practices that work best for you. This allows students to recognize that you are human, too, and it creates an environment where they feel more connected to their faculty and staff. Since we never know the physical, environmental, or cognitive troubles students bring into the classroom, it is necessary to create learning spaces with campus leaders that actually care about them and want them to succeed. According to Education Week (2018), students who believe they have a voice in school are 7 times more likely to be academically motivated than those who do not feel they have a voice.

### Here are some tips to help get you started:

- **Ask students how they're doing:** Time permitting, take a few minutes at the beginning of every class period and work week to ask students about their lives. Ask them how they're feeling, how their day is going (one good thing, one bad thing), and if there's anything they need to "air out" before you dive into content. Acknowledge their responses and share your thoughts; empathize with them. From there, you can set the tone of your time together.
- **Enforce mental health and wellness check-ins:** these are days where you make yourself available for the sole purpose of meeting with students who need to a check-up. There's no lecture, no homework, and no grading. It's a time for students to reflect, relax, and recharge with you, human to human. Have students journal, sketch, meditate, or even dance. The Center for Innovative Education (2018) states, "Instructors can encourage student agency by creating opportunities for students to practice mindfulness through thought, self-reflection, and constructive feedback."

- **Create discussion lounges:** these are anonymous, virtual spaces where students can chat with each other without fear of what they have to say. They can share life updates, funny memes or videos they come across, and otherwise use the space as an open forum. Sometimes this can take the form of group chats or social media handles, but only if you're comfortable sharing contact information with your students. Some professors have gone so far as to create Facebook pages for their students.
- **Provide time management schedules:** a problem with self-care is figuring out when it should happen. Give students a blank schedule with time blocks for every day of the week for the hours 6AM-12AM. Have them fill it out based on their personal and academic life. Then have students look for blocks they can devote to self-care. Student Voice Incorporated (2021) mentions that "Students can be storytellers, organizers, and institutional partners who know how to advocate for student-driven solutions to educational inequity."
- **Share coping skills & resources:** the Regional Education Leadership (2020) reports that "Creating culturally responsive classrooms is particularly important during and following the COVID-19 pandemic." One way to foster a culturally responsive classroom is to own up to the effects of the global crisis and help students figure out how to cope with those effects. Show students where to find accurate information about the pandemic. Help them to be patient with the school's response; remind them that the college is learning information at the same rate as anyone else.

For additional resources on how to help students with life stuff, see Kris Weberg's "Life Stuff" Radio Button.