

School leadership – Leading into a very different new school year

For many of you, the new school year traditionally brought about an array of plans, meetings, phone calls, timetables and an air of excitement for the return of students and staff. In Ireland in 2020, however, the return to our school hallways has never looked more different.

The global pandemic has created a wave of uncertainty, unknowns and change for all of us and we witness this more than ever within our schools. As a principal or deputy principal, you may, no doubt, find yourself in a difficult situation trying to focus, prioritise, adapt, plan and respond to the needs of your school community as they begin to trickle back through the doors. Given the challenges of the last number of months, Jigsaw recognises the need for support in the area of mental health and wellbeing for you, your staff and, in particular, your students.

We know that mental health and wellbeing is central to learning, and for the cognitive development of young people, being resilient and feeling connected to their school communities

and their relationships with those around them matter more. In order to build and maintain good relationships, which are key to mental health and wellbeing, you must focus on minding yourself. You, as educators, play a critical role in promoting and supporting the mental health and wellbeing of students and school staff but in order to care for others it is vital that you are caring for yourself.

This resource provides you with practical tips on how to:

- **Refocus on mental health and wellbeing within the school environment**
- **Understand the importance of self-care**
- **Promote and support staff mental health and wellbeing**
- **Look forward with hope**



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Refocus on mental health and wellbeing:

Throughout the disruption of the past five months, schools have responded immediately, sensitively and creatively to the demands placed on them by the impact of the coronavirus pandemic. As well as having to think about how education is being delivered, moving from the classroom to living rooms and kitchens all over the country, school leaders have had to consider the social and emotional impacts of lockdown and how it has affected their staff and students' wellbeing.

You, and your school teams, now have the opportunity to refocus on mental health and wellbeing to model behaviour, which gives reassurance to young people, empowering and enabling them to better understand the situation and what they can do to look after themselves. Often, challenges like these can present us with an opportunity. For you, in your role as leaders, the focus on mental health and wellbeing has never been more critical, and starting with your own self-care will enable you to better respond to the needs of your school community.

Here are five practical ways to begin to consider your own self-care strategies:

1. **Find connection** – Relationships are central to self-care; finding connection with your peers and colleagues, those who support you and those you can trust and lean towards in times of difficulty is very important. For many in education, these connections can also come from shared learning

with like-minded people in similar roles who connect over a love of teaching, a desire to learn or simply a safe space to talk. Accept that it is OK to be vulnerable and ask for help. We so often encourage students to ask for help so we must begin to lead the way.

2. **Be open to learning** – Be unafraid to learn new ways to lead, to cope, to reflect and to share. There are so many new and innovative ways to transfer knowledge and share learning. Our online engagement has evolved over the last few months, perhaps through necessity rather than desire; however, it opens us up to an evolving world of expertise, experience and information. Taking the time to build your own capacity, or that of your team, will strengthen your approaches to challenges that may arise, or it may build confidence and competence. Sharing these resources with your staff and your students during your staff meetings, your assemblies in the school or in a newsletter will create opportunities for conversation and mutual understanding.
3. **Build routines** - Stressful situations can often cause us to let go of our routines, especially the ones that often recharge our batteries like the walk at lunchtime, the exercise class after work or even something as simple as cooking dinner with the family. When we are dealing

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with competing demands and priorities, we tend to drop the priorities that help us to care for ourselves. By setting out and maintaining your routine, it will also allow you to refocus, recalibrate and, more importantly, re-energise.

4. **Reflect and refocus** – While the new school year will look and feel very different, it will provide an opportunity to reflect on the last few months, the hard times and the strengths we have found to help us through. Giving time and space to think and talk about this will support you to reflect on your own inner strengths and abilities, and this is something that can be replicated for your staff and your students. Refocusing the mind can often involve reframing and changing our language. Here is one practical strategy that you may find useful: on one side of a page, write, 'Grateful for' and list your items of gratitude. On the other side, write, 'Looking forward to,' and reframe items you might otherwise avoid. For example, instead of writing, 'Yet another parent meeting,' write 'A chance

to build a stronger connection with a parent through this meeting.'

This daily reflection takes two to three minutes to complete and can help to create a sense of purpose for the day and gratitude for what can be accomplished.

5. **Be mindful** – You will now need more emotional intelligence than you know. Take a breath. The next time one of those stress-inducing emails shows up in your inbox, take a moment, recognise what it is you feel and allow yourself a few minutes. Making sure our physical response to stress does not affect our emotional response to a situation is critical. If you have been in a meeting or working on a project for some time, take a moment to stand up, take a deep breath, and stretch. Adding a quick walk during the day for fresh air can help you to think of new ideas to address challenges ahead.



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Understand the importance of self-care

Self-care should be an integrated part of our daily lives, rather than something we focus on separately or something we feel we need to attend to in the evenings or at weekends. Self-care is something that we so often sacrifice – for that work deadline, that meeting, or that other responsibility – yet, it is something that is critical to support us to be healthy and happy. Jigsaw has gathered some views on self-care from educators, clinicians, health promotion experts and students on how schools can support healthy behaviours. These views are captured in the quotes included below.

Why is self-care important for our mental health and wellbeing?

School staff often juggle multiple complex tasks and demands, so a focus on staff mental health and wellbeing has become an increasing priority in the education sector. Taking good care of staff helps them to perform to the best of their ability and ensures that they are better able to support students.

“We all have busy lives and lots of demands; we offer different things to different people. We are mothers, fathers, sisters, friends, teachers and so much more. We, as humans, generally care deeply about others and their welfare. And go out of our way to help and support people, often neglecting ourselves or not leaving time to care for ourselves. We cannot feed others from an empty barrel. If we have not thought of our own self-care and looked after our own needs, both physically and mentally, we will not be able to fulfil the many roles we play in

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other people’s lives. We need to mind ourselves and keep topping up the barrel so we have the energy and physical and mental fitness to support others and live efficient, happy lives.”

Youth advisory panel member in Jigsaw

Workloads, deadlines, challenging behaviours, let alone finding ourselves amidst a global pandemic, can have a significant impact on the mental health and wellbeing of school staff. This may also affect their ability to manage during critical moments of stress or strain in the classroom. Staff who have good mental health are more likely to have the necessary resources to be able to respond to, manage and plan, during or after stressful episodes, whether with a student, a class, a colleague, an inspector or a parent. Self-care within schools is not an indulgence. It is an essential component of prevention of distress and burnout. It should not be considered as something ‘extra’ or ‘nice’ to do if you have the time. Rather, it is an essential part of our professional identities (Barnett, Baker, Elman and Schoener, 2007).

“I think self-care is so important as it's really the foundation for everything we do. It's what helps to keep us going from day-to-day especially when things get a bit hectic. It's how our body and mind takes time to rest and focus on something that is purely about looking after ourselves. It's time away from the 'to do list' as such, to something that is hopefully enjoyable.”

Jigsaw schools coordinator



Why is self-care often neglected?

“It takes time and energy to invest in self-care, and these are often in short supply when things become busy. In reality, it is when things are busy that we need to focus more on self-care, but that can seem either unimportant or self-indulgent in the short-term. Trying to take a longer term view can help and recognising the damaging impact to ourselves and those around us when we let our own self-care slide.”

Clinical manager, Jigsaw

“Self-care is often neglected because life is busy; often with not enough hours in the day and we struggle to balance work, home life, family, self. Often we prioritise other things and other people over ourselves, we tend to come last on a long list of daily and weekly priorities. When life and work are busy, we tend to neglect the things that help us to care for ourselves – time-out, exercise, rest, leisure activities – we don't have enough time for these and these are the very things that help our self-care.”

Health promotion practitioner
and former school teacher

“I think it's the thing we don't prioritise as being important and only realise it, often when we need it the most. We might think it's not going to help us get through that 'to do list' so we put it off. We often don't realise that by saying 'yes' to everything and everyone else, we are often saying no to time for ourselves; 'that piece of work needs to get completed', 'the dinner needs to get cooked', 'the house needs to be cleaned' ... but sometimes we also need to be saying 'I

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have my walk now at 8pm' or 'I'm going to take time to read my book this evening.”

Jigsaw youth and community
engagement worker

Promoting and supporting staff mental health and wellbeing:

“A big part of my own self-care is around regularly checking in on my expectations of myself. I juggle many roles and can be a bit of a perfectionist, so I have to give myself permission to let some things go at times. I have found it really helpful to myself and others to acknowledge when things are tough and to share that, rather than sticking with the default 'it's grand' response. I think my top tip would be to be aware of your own capacity and know when to say 'no' - none of us are superhuman.”

Clinical manager, Jigsaw

As a school principal/deputy principal there are a number of strategies you and your leadership teams can consider in promoting and supporting staff mental health and wellbeing:

- 1. Model good working practices and self-care** to encourage a work/life balance. This can include encouraging and taking regular breaks, finishing on time, asking for support when needed and providing a dedicated space and time to connect with staff.
- 2. Communicate clearly with your staff**, particularly in relation to any changes that might be taking place at school as a result of the coronavirus or associated situations. It is encouraged, in line



with best practice, to consult with staff about changes and offer reassurance, where possible. Remember to also feedback on the positives and things that are going well. A focus on strengths within the school can provide staff with a sense of support.

3. **Culture is key.** In order to change the culture and ethos of a school it is vital that any strategies to promote and support staff mental health and wellbeing are led by the Principal and senior school staff.
4. **Promote and encourage a sense of community.** This can be achieved by creating opportunities for staff to get together, to connect and to engage with one another through non-work related activities for staff.
5. **Prioritise staff mental health and wellbeing** on the school agenda. Reinforce this message through the board of management and parent association.

6. **Identify opportunities** for staff to engage in capacity-building workshops that will support conversations, helping to normalise the process of speaking about mental health and wellbeing. This can be achieved through lunchtime seminars, online workshops and in-service days and can include topics such as managing stress. It can also be useful to provide opportunities for colleagues to debrief with each other on a regular basis.
7. **Provide school staff with dedicated time and space** to share their thoughts on self-care; how do they look after themselves? What makes them feel empowered to practice self-care? This can help to develop a more inclusive culture, building a sense of belonging and connection.



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Looking forward with the 'whole-school' community:

The incredible successes of schools during lockdown have been achieved through the compassion and commitment of school staff across the country. There can be no better time to show respect to their work by developing or reviewing approaches to staff mental health and wellbeing in order to sustain the school staff both now and into the future.

As schools return to some semblance of normality, it is important to reflect on what has been achieved during this period and to acknowledge the strengths among staff in getting through this challenging time within the community. With no notice, entire ways of working have been re-designed and implemented and new ways of reaching out to students have been developed. You and your teams have created new ways of communicating, new ways to teach online, new support systems and now your team have the momentum to build on this moving forward. What schools have achieved is nothing short of amazing, and acknowledging this to staff and students, as well as to the wider school community, at a time which has undoubtedly been difficult and stressful for all concerned, is the best way to start the new school year **filled with hope**. There is so much to look back on and to be proud of and it is important to communicate this to all those who contributed.

"You can already see the movement to more holistic wellness and integrated wellness. Schools are starting to realise that wellness and self-care, cannot be

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isolated. It cannot be separate. The next thing is to look at more than just supporting "additional" wellness initiatives and looking deeper. Looking at the mindset and developing the right behaviours for healthy staff and students."

Mental health promotion practitioner

As school business begins to return to the 'new normal', living alongside covid-19, it is important that young people settle back into familiar routines. We know that many of the school activities will have to change to meet our current health restrictions and associated guidelines, so finding elements of consistency will support students and help them to adjust. Discussing how routines have been altered also helps to keep everyone safe; it is an opportunity to reflect, but also to provide opportunities to share thoughts and feelings.

It is important to get a balance between recognition of what students have achieved during lockdown and the challenges they may have faced, and to give them the opportunity to discuss these, if they feel comfortable doing so. It will be reassuring for students to hear their peers identifying similar concerns and experiences. It can also offer an opportunity to engage students in classroom-based discussions with teacher-led approaches, which can focus on equipping students with strategies to cope with change, uncertainty and unknowns.

We know that students of all ages will have questions about the changes to schools and, of course, the impact of



coronavirus. Many may not have felt comfortable or confident to ask these questions at home or through virtual learning or social platforms. Prioritising time and space for students and teachers to talk about these changes, to feel listened to and to feel supported is an important role for the school in the coming weeks. This can support the mental health and wellbeing of both staff and students and it may prevent students becoming overwhelmed with information throughout the days and weeks of the initial return to school.

Jigsaw support for schools as they return alongside covid-19

Jigsaw has created a series of classroom-based resources to support these conversations, available at [jigsaw.ie](https://www.jigsaw.ie).

These activities, approaches and resources are designed to support schools as they begin the process of opening their gates to students. The current crisis offers an opportunity to apply new ways of thinking about students' emotional needs. This may now be the time for school leaders to look at developing and implementing a whole-school approach to mental health and wellbeing in order to support the school through this period of transition. A whole-school approach will enable school communities to adopt a universal approach that staff, students and parents can benefit from and to target and tailor resources to those who need them the most.



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