

BREATHE to Belong

Joelle Hood helps educators build connectedness and resilience

Social isolation and loneliness are as harmful to your body as smoking 15 cigarettes a day, according to the U.S. Surgeon General. On the other hand, receiving a simple hug can actually lower your blood pressure and heart rate, and boost your immune system.

So why don't we all take a five-minute break from our frantic schedules and just... B.R.E.A.T.H.E., suggests Dr. Joelle Hood of Thriving YOUiversity. The cute acronym packs a punch, because the seven steps it lays out might be just what the doctor ordered to help reverse some downward trends in education.

First, the bad news. Between smart phones and the pandemic, the number of people feeling alone and gloomy has become an epidemic in itself. We have dotted-line and surface connections to others out there, but we're increasingly disconnected from the very people we're in the room with. Elevations in depression and anxiety among students and teachers is impacting their health, relationships, work and school performance.

"A 9th grader told me that in elementary school, she knew *everyone*. Now, she doesn't know *anyone*," says Hood. "Incivility on school campuses is up, and whether we experience incivility or just witness it, 80% of people have lost work time worrying about it; 78% report a decline in commitment to their employer. It decreases our production and robs us of our potential."

Emotional Contagion

Now, the good news. As teachers, we create the climate in the classrooms we're in. The energy starts with us. If we laugh, the students laugh with us. If we spread positives, we make learning fun. But we're also helping students to reflect on their purpose, tap into thankfulness and appreciation, harness their thoughts, empower empathy, engage in self compassion, and amplify attention, awareness and awe. These lead to a stronger internal sense of belonging, which nurtures their resilience to adversity.

Build Belonging: "Belonging" is not the same thing as "fitting in." It means I can be who I am, not walking on eggshells, says Hood. Even if folks totally disagree with me, I still belong. Relationships are built in the moments before and after a meeting, between the official minutes. So give that person 100% of your attention and when you're asked a question, don't hold your phone or set it down – put it completely away. Look that person in the eye, say their name, listen with intent, and don't multitask.

Reflect on Purpose: People with a strong sense of purpose don't get discouraged by obstacles – and live seven years longer, on average! The purpose you share doesn't have to be bold or grand, adds Hood. It can be as simple as telling someone "You have a warm smile." Or find something you're passionate about, that you do on the weekend, and bring it to work. Music, for example, helped one teacher find her voice, so she started a singing group for teachers. If you could change something, what is one step you can actually do toward making it happen? That is a powerful way to gain purpose. *When you know why, you gain more what.*

Engage in Self-Compassion: Pay attention to how you're talking to yourself, and give yourself some grace, says Hood. We're all doing the best we can. A moment of self-compassion can change your whole day. When we allow ourselves to be kind and tender to ourselves, it increases our emotional intelligence. It allows us to recognize when we're having a moment of anguish. It reminds us that suffering is a part of life and others have felt the same way. *Breathe in: I do my best. Breathe out: I let go of the rest.*

Attention, Awareness and Awe: Multitasking is actually switching between tasks, says Hood. And every time we start or stop, the process drains us. Work takes 50% longer to complete, with 50% more errors. So, try single tasking: pick an hour, divide it up into say, three equal parts, set the timer on your phone, and tell yourself that's the only thing I'm going to do; I won't get distracted or go down the rabbit hole. It's amazing what you can get down in just 20 minutes if that's the only thing you're working on. Similarly, awe is interrupting the auto pilot and using mindfulness to recapture that sense of wonder and delight. To experience

awe, try simply going for a walk without a destination or purpose. Turn your phone on airplane mode and only use it to take photos.

Thankfulness and Appreciation: Build signals to yourself to add small increments of gratefulness in our daily life, Hood advises. It increases our happiness and boosts our immune system, resilience, relationships, and sleep. For example, every time you wash your hands, identify three things you're grateful for. When we can express that gratitude in the form of appreciation to others, the habit becomes a powerful win-win for ourselves and those around us.

Harness Your Thoughts: When we get caught in a whirlwind of negative contemplations – comparing ourselves to what others have, labeling yourself, retreating to an all-or-nothing “I always get screwed” rumination of the past or worry about the future – we get caught in a whirlwind that pulls us from the present, says Hood. You can't eliminate negative thoughts, but you can shoo them away. Record them; just acknowledge you're having them. *Name it to tame it.* Then challenge the thought by offering an alternate perspective. The process will help bring you back to the present.

Empathy: Fostering compassion for others isn't for only their benefit. Regardless of whether we receive or give empathy, our brain loves it, says Hood. *So get curious, not furious.* When the driver next to your car is rudely speeding by, imagine she's trying to get to the hospital in time. When the slowpoke in front is frustrating you, imagine the poor guy just got dumped by his girlfriend.

Lastly, even with good intentions, we can have a negative impact and we can get caught up in missing the mark when it comes to empathy, Hood says. Don't try to minimize someone's pain with disappointment, or one up them, or immediately jump in with solutions. They don't want you to fix the problem; they just want empathy. So connect first: show enthusiasm, ask questions, relive the experience with them. If they ask for help, then shift to problem solving.