

W-3: Sustain energy to reach ambitious goals

Maintain mental health

Many corps members have dealt with significant stressors and mental health issues in their lives, and it is a reality that these issues can develop, and have developed, when paired with the significant stress of teaching. Knowing what to look for and responding early is the key to managing these issues successfully. Towards that end, consider the following five steps to maintaining mental health developed by Dr. Chris Brownson (Los Angeles '93), Teach For America's National Mental Health Consultant:

1. Identify potential stressors
 - a. Related to both work and your personal life
 - b. These could be potential stressors, or things that are already negatively impacting you
2. Create a plan for coping strategies
 - a. During difficult times in your life, what are specific things that you did to cope that you think were healthy for you, things you wish you had done that you think would have been healthy, or things that you saw others do in similar circumstances that seemed like good ways of coping?
 - b. Sample strategies: keep up with hobbies, exercise, eat healthily, make sleep a priority, pause for breathing, talk about or write out your troubles, make time for yourself
 - c. Identify a few ways of coping and self-care that you will commit to doing
3. Be on the lookout for signs that usual coping is not sufficient - sometimes the balance between stressors and coping can get out of whack (If you recognize any of these warning signs, don't be afraid to get it checked out with a professional)
 - a. Behavioral signs
 - i. Marked change in eating or sleeping routines
 - ii. Excessive energy, hyperactivity, or rapid speech
 - b. Emotional signs
 - i. Feeling little or no interest in things
 - ii. Extreme anxiety resulting in panic reactions
 - iii. Feeling hopeless, helpless, or worthless
 - c. Signs regarding your thoughts
 - i. Repetitive and unwanted thoughts that are difficult to get rid of
 - ii. Thoughts along the line of "This just isn't worth it anymore, I wish I were dead"
4. Establish agreements with your closest friends to help monitor each other's mental health – it can be really hard to self-monitor
5. Be prepared to reach out to sources of support, professional or otherwise
 - a. It is always appropriate to approach your program director with any mental health issues or questions you might have, and their role is to point you in the right direction to get the help that you need, rather than providing that assistance themselves.
 - b. Things to ask your program director or regional Teach For America office about:
 - i. A list of the mental health providers available in your school district through your insurance (psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, and Licensed Professional Counselors)
 - ii. A list of gyms, yoga studios, meditation groups, and religious communities in your region

In summary, to help maintain your mental health: identify potential stressors that could impact you (or that already are impacting you), create a plan for coping strategies, be on the lookout for signs that your coping strategies are not working, work with friends and colleagues to monitor each other's mental health, and finally – be prepared to reach out to sources of support. Remember, it is typically the teachers who recognize that they need help and seek it that tend to fare better and perform better than those teachers who chose not to address these issues.