**ADVICE**

# Teacher resilience during coronavirus school closures

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## SUMMARY

'Resilience' can be defined in a number of different ways and this means that it can sometimes be a confusing concept to understand[1]. Most definitions commonly refer to two things:

> 1. Overcoming adversity

> 2. Being able to adapt to challenging situations[2,3]

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic it may be useful to explore how resilience can be promoted for teachers at this time – supporting positive adaptation in the face of significant challenge.

Research exploring teacher resilience has looked at ways that resilience can be promoted and eroded over time[4]. This suggests that resilience is a process as opposed to an internal trait. Resilience can change over time depending on the context or situation – it is not a case of having or not having resilience. Therefore, factors known to promote resilience in teachers can be fostered and drawn upon in the current climate.

This short paper is a quick reference guide and a 'conversation starter' designed to promote teacher resilience. The aim is not to be prescriptive as we know that teachers demonstrate resilience on a daily basis in their busy lives in the profession. We also know that resilience is often community-focused and therefore support is often best placed within pre-existing relationships.

We hope this paper provides a framework, informed by psychology, to support what is likely to be happening in some capacity already within educational organisations in the UK. The suggestions that we make in this paper are based on evidence from research and practice.

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This framework explores support in fostering teacher resilience in relation to three areas as these areas have been found to be key to enhancing teacher resilience:

1. Belonging

2. Help-seeking

3. Learning

# Fostering a sense of belonging and connectedness

Resilience is known to centre on the fundamental principle of relationships[5], with humans showing an inherent need to belong and connect to one another[6,7,8,9]. An important consideration for now is how we can foster a sense of belonging and connectedness at a time of isolation and remote working.

Prior research exploring teacher resilience has identified four important levels of relationships:

- Teacher-Headteacher relationships[10];
- Teacher-Teacher relationships;
- Teacher-Student relationships;
- Teacher-Personal relationships[11].

The sections below include some ideas of how these relationships can be continued and developed in a time of isolation in order to foster teacher resilience.

## PROMOTING HEADTEACHER-TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS

- Check in with staff quickly, little and often through the use of texts, emails, and virtual staff meetings etc;
- Leaders can explicitly encourage staff to check-in with each other;
- Continue to give everyday praise and feedback to ensure teachers still feel valued and that their efforts are recognised;
- Communicate updates regularly with all staff.

**Why we've suggested these things**
Senior leaders will be exceptionally busy at this time. Nurturing relationships with staff does not necessarily need to be a time-consuming process; resilience is often conceptualised as 'ordinary magic'[12]. Therefore, taking advantage of everyday opportunities to build in this relational support, and opportunities to connect, may help teachers feel valued and 'held in mind'.

## PROMOTING TEACHER-TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS

- Carefully plan the use of rota systems in school that will promote physical (but safe) contact with others;
- Use online technology to create a 'virtual staffroom' where teachers can chat and check-in with each other;
- Be clear about the difference between times when staff should attend the virtual staffroom e.g. whole staff briefings, and times where it is optional;
- Create 'buddy networks' so teachers have a small network of individuals they can contact when needed.

**Why we've suggested these things**
With a lack of physical proximity, ways to stay connected to colleagues will be important to consider. Teachers frequently report that relationships with colleagues are key to their resilience.

## PROMOTING TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS

- Email students to see how they are getting on;
- Provide an online learning platform where students can communicate with their class teachers;
- Record a short video with teachers talking about what they have been up to and sharing this on a safe, online platform – it's ok for this to be a social catch-up;
- Check in with those students who are more vulnerable;
- Some children may not have access to remote technology, it may be possible to use school systems to text or call these children, with parental permission.

**Why we've suggested these things**
Research has typically explored the benefits of teacher-student relationships from the child's perspective. However, these relationships are also reflected on positively by teachers, who have identified them as a key motivating factor for staying in the profession[12,13].

## PROMOTING TEACHER-PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

- Take regular breaks;
- Follow a routine/structure to your day;
- Go out for a walk with those you live with;
- Do something enjoyable together;
- Check in with those who might live alone;
- Prioritise time with family and virtual time with friends;
- Differentiate work and leisure time;
- Limit how much you check your work emails.

**Why we've suggested these things**
Wider personal relationships, and the ability to draw on support networks including friends and family, have also been found to be beneficial to Teacher Resilience. You should consider these suggestions alongside advice from Gov.UK and the World Health Organisation guidance about how to support your own wellbeing.

# Promoting help-seeking

To foster teacher resilience through supporting help-seeking:

- All school staff should model help-seeking behaviours;
- Enable staff to contribute to decisions e.g. through online polls and the points below;
- Ask explicitly if staff may need additional support and what this might look like;
- Encourage staff to seek help from peers – teachers report particularly valuing using peers as sounding boards[14,15];
- Senior leaders inviting feedback e.g. during staff check-ins or briefings;
- Share guidance and advice from relevant teaching unions – for example, the NEU has produced guidance on distance teaching.

**Why we've suggested these things**

The act of seeking help from others has been found to contribute to teachers resilience[11], however research has shown that teachers sometimes perceive help-seeking behaviour as evidence of failing or weakness[17].

In the current context we recognise that it might be particularly difficult to justify help-seeking because of a number of different thoughts:

- 'Everyone is really busy; they won't have time'
- 'I need to just get on with it'

Seeking help can also create feelings of vulnerability, however teachers have reported that both **seeking help** and being able to **give help** significantly contribute to their own sense of resilience[11].

It can be difficult to be vulnerable with someone that you don't know and this is why we advocate for a community-based understanding of resilience, cultivated through pre-existing relationships, as opposed to an 'expert model' which may suggest that teachers need 'expert' help or support right now.

# Continuing to support development and learning

To continue to foster resilience through learning, staff teams might like to:

- Explicitly recognise reflective conversations as learning opportunities;
- Recognise learning as inherently challenging and an experience that can lead to feelings of self-doubt or vulnerability;
- Engage in initiatives that promote team reflection e.g. a virtual staffroom;
- Trial a solution-focused approach with a specific focus on doing more of what is working well.

**Why we've suggested these things**

Teachers value the opportunity to learn and develop their sense of self-efficacy (the beliefs we have of our own abilities) and this in turn cultivates resilience[18]. In some cases, teachers have explicitly discussed how learning is related to self-awareness and self-doubt.

It is likely that at this time, many teachers may be experiencing feelings of self-doubt, particularly as they try to develop ways of being a teacher in uncharted waters.

At the current time more formal opportunities for learning and development e.g. courses or INSET occasions might not be possible, but this doesn't mean that the desire for learning cannot be fulfilled.

We know that senior leaders, teachers and support staff are engaging in learning in their schools and communities. Staff teams will be learning from successes and failures every day, adjusting plans, trying new things out and reflecting on this. Such an approach is likely to enhance resilience.

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