Retain Your Resilience

Strategies to help you and your team stay positive in the face of a challenging new school year.

By Patricia L. Fitzgerald
Schools and their cafeterias are beginning to reopen this month, and if social media posts are any indication, school nutrition professionals are looking at the year ahead with a mixture of enthusiasm and trepidation. For most, summer seemed to have been a welcome break, with opportunities to breathe and recharge—but one not nearly long enough after the intensity of the previous two years. High-energy inservice events with staff and the expected ebullience of seeing students again are also tinged with worry about managing another year of product shortages, increased food and labor expenses and the expected challenges associated with collecting meal applications from families. How will you hang on to all that you love about your school nutrition career when the going gets tough? How will you rally your team through their frustrations?

The bad news is that it’s not going to just “happen.” Sustaining your spirit is another priority to add to your to-do list. You will need to be intentional about taking self-care steps, whether it’s adopting certain new habits or routines or creating a go-to list of quick-fix suggestions that you can post on your refrigerator, next to your computer, on the dashboard of the car or on the bathroom mirror—and follow through with the ideas that are right for you, right now.

The good news is that it can be done. Not only can you only survive the tough times to come, but you can thrive! This is not to say there aren’t going to be days where you cry in the walk-in or fantasize about other job options or even retirement. But at School Nutrition, we suspect that the love of this profession, combined with mindful self-care strategies, will keep those days to a minimum for you. Then, as you pay forward similar love and care to your staff and coworkers, they also will be able to retain their resilience.

We’ve compiled a wide variety of tactics to consider, try and embrace. In keeping with the air travel maxim to manage your own oxygen mask before helping others, this article will focus primarily on self-care strategies. Many of these likely will sound familiar, but we hope that you’ll look at them anew in this context and during this back-to-school season.
FOCUS ON THE FUNDAMENTAL FOUR
You know 'em, and you know their power:
Make healthy food choices. Stay hydrated. Be physically active. Get good sleep.

So practical, reasonable and effective to our physical and mental well-being, and yet at least one of these habits is often the first to go by the wayside in times of stress. We skip meals and/or we turn to craveable snacks and comfort food favorites. We forget to drink water between meals. We move from sitting at a desk to sitting at a meeting, then sitting in the car and then collapsing on the couch, often too exhausted for “exercise.” We may struggle to relax into sleep, replaying the past and spinning about the future. Or we “crash” into a long nap, upsetting healthy sleep patterns.

If you lose control of just one or two of these core health practices, it may be fairly easy to recognize this, reset and focus on steps to get back into a routine. But if an honest assessment is that you are managing these only on a sporadic, hit-or-miss basis, then you should tackle just one of these at a time and take baby steps to build a healthier habit.

Start with the one that is arguably the “easiest.” For example, if you have a long-standing struggle with making healthier food choices, give yourself some grace to put off a disciplined approach for now while you focus on, say, carrying a water bottle wherever you go to make it easy to keep sipping throughout the day. Or if you know you are prone to napping in the early evening, set an alarm on your phone before you hit the cushions to wake you up within 30 minutes or an hour, to take the edge off without compromising your normal bedtime.

Give yourself permission to ease into new or renewed habits. Set a small, achievable goal, such as improving the number of fruit/vegetable servings you consume each day, rather than trying to eliminate the foods you find comforting. Instead of pledging to walk for 30 minutes every day, start with a promise to hit that target three or four days of the upcoming week.
“The enjoyment we derive from the pursuits we love typically carries on even when we’ve moved on to more mundane activities.”

SCHEDULE ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

Complete this sentence: “Once I finally retire, I will have more time for ___. “ Why wait? Except for extensive travel, you can accommodate more time for the things that nourish your soul right now. It may not be as much time as you’ll be able to devote when you’re no longer working, but it can be just enough to counterbalance daily stress and frustration. The key is to reserve time for such activities by adding them in your calendar or to-do list just as you would appointments, chores and errands.

Activities like reading, crafting, gardening, gaming, dinners with friends, movies, yoga, sports, cultural events, volunteering, hiking, music, time with grandchildren, faith-based fellowship and so on are not the luxuries that they may seem. The enjoyment we derive from the pursuits we love typically carries on even when we've moved on to more mundane activities. Depending on the activity, you might schedule it daily, weekly or monthly—but make it a priority.

Be rigorous about keeping to your assigned schedule. If you find you keep skipping the activity, you'll never succeed in training yourself to view it as a bona fide self-care strategy. But take care to stick within the allotted time. A perceived over-indulgence, especially when your plate is full, can leave you feeling guilty and more stressed—and subsequently disinclined to prioritize this self-care time again.

Convinced you really have no time to spare? Take a week and track the time you spend in ultimately less satisfying activities like watching TikTok videos or scrolling mindlessly through social media posts, playing addictive phone/computer games or channel surfing. If you’re honest about adding up the time, the results may shock you and reveal that you can find the time for more nurturing pursuits.

You might find it easier to stick to your plan if you set some light accountability measures. For example, find a partner who will commit to doing a particular activity together, whether it’s meeting at the community garden at a prearranged time or getting a subscription to the theater together. Join a book or movie club or a studio arts class where you are expected to complete an assignment or project by a certain date.
LOOK FOR THE BRIGHT SIDE
Be intentional about discovering simple joys and wonders. If you’re going to scroll through social media, ignore politics and seek out videos of adorable toddlers and baby animals. If you don’t work in a school cafeteria and you have some latitude at lunchtime, stop by to have a meal with youngsters once a week. Treat your senses. Are you an early riser? Make a point to take a sunrise picture with your phone camera every morning—even if it’s stormy—and over the course of a few weeks, you’ll find yourself marveling at the subtle differences in light and shadow. (Many wellness experts point to the health benefits of time spent in nature.) Don’t neglect your other senses. For example, at the start of every meal, pay attention to the aroma, flavor and texture sensations of your first few bites to really appreciate the experience. Turn off the news and turn on a short playlist of songs from when you were in high school.

Keep a gratitude journal, starting or ending each day by recording a short list. It’s okay to repeat the same items if you’re feeling stuck. You can always be grateful for waking up, for health, for loved ones, for laughter, for positive memories and so on.

“ ‘Tis a gift to be simple,” starts a famous Shaker hymn, and it’s a good reminder when life feels overwhelming. Let go of the stress—even just for a few minutes—with an intentional focus on the many gifts of this life.

WHEN AT WORK
Your resilience is likely to be most challenged when at work. While the self-care strategies we’ve already covered will help you be better prepared to deal with issues that arise, you may want to consider the following tactics, as well.

❤ Find some privacy and do a short breathing exercise. Breathe in, counting to four. Hold it, counting to four. Exhale, counting to four. Repeat for at least four rounds.
Today's school nutrition challenges have an impact on everyone. A focus on morale and team building will be more essential than ever in the coming year. This responsibility is not limited to managers and supervisors, however. All employees should be mindful of the impact of their actions on coworkers. Here are some steps to consider:

For Directors/Supervisors
- Make a point to learn the names of individual employees at different sites so that you can greet and thank them for their work when you make periodic visits.
- Ease up on certain department rules/policies, as appropriate. For example, maybe you can create staggered shifts for greater flexibility, allow staff to wear jeans or capris or (if permitted by HR) leave early on a Friday afternoon without any dock in pay.
- Send handwritten thank-you notes to managers acknowledging their work. Be specific and detailed.
- Provide each site manager with a number of gift cards to local retailers that they can use to reward employees who make above-and-beyond contributions.
- Use manager meetings to discuss team-building strategies and best practices that all can try.
- Remember that activities should be voluntary and reward/incentives should be varied to address the differing needs of individuals.

For Managers
- Post motivational or humorous quotes on bulletin boards and swap these out at least once a week.
- Establish regular activities for fun and even silliness. Maybe it’s Karaoke Kitchen or Dance Party Delivery Day.
- Remind team members that you are available to listen.
- Inquire if there is a budget to purchase refillable water bottles from the SNA Shop so that you can distribute these to employees to encourage healthy hydration.
- Coordinate creative competitions, such as door or display decorations, food art or decorating empty #10 cans for the serving line.
- Say thank you—often.
- Write a note to each employee that acknowledges their individual strengths, whether it’s their diligence with HACCP records or the brightness of their smile.
- Remember that activities should be voluntary and reward/incentives should be varied to address the differing needs of individuals.

For Employees at All Levels
- Practice generosity of spirit, compassion and increased patience. Everyone has different breaking points.
- Offer support, asking the other person to identify what would be helpful.
- Show interest in the lives and experiences of colleagues, but respect privacy.
- Remove yourself from others’ relentless negativity or toxicity.
- Be a role model of grace under pressure.
- Keep your focus on the things that you can control: your own thoughts, emotions, behaviors and choices. Do the best you can and let go of the rest.
The counting is important because it will demand your attention and help keep you from being reactive to whatever unpleasantness has just transpired.

❤ Find some privacy (again) and go ahead and have a short cry. Fans of the movie “Broadcast News” will remember how Holly Hunter’s character used a timer for her weepy breakdowns as a necessary cathartic release of her stressful job.

❤ Alternate distasteful tasks with ones that you enjoy or that are somewhat mindless. For example, after concluding a call with an angry parent, spend 30 minutes planning your National School Lunch Week celebration. (Bonus: This year’s “Peace, Love and School Lunch” theme is itself a good attitude-adjuster!) Or follow up a discouraging financial analysis with a little file management (organizing and purging) for a short period.

❤ Limit, but don't eliminate, venting sessions. It's definitely helpful to jettison angry and frustrated feelings in a safe space to someone who has your back, but recounting your grievances over and over can keep you stuck in that negative space, undermining your equanimity and your productivity.

❤ Turn down the volume on your inner critic. (Check out “Positive Self Talk” in the August 2021 issue of School Nutrition: www.tinyurl.com/InnerCritic-SNmag.) Similarly, try not to give in to “awfulizing” (predicting the worst possible outcomes in a difficult situation) either on your own or from others on your team.

❤ Schedule a few breaks in the day. Refill your water bottle, take a lap around the parking lot, do a few seated and standing stretches.

KEEP CALM, BE COMPASSIONATE AND CARRY ON!

If you’ve chosen to read this article and have gotten to this point, you clearly love your school nutrition career and want to spend more time enjoying what you do, instead of dreading what the next day will bring. The suggested tactics we’ve identified can’t eliminate the challenges that lie ahead, but we hope they will help build your resilience to manage problems in a way that reflects your best self, leaving you less depleted and discouraged and more satisfied and optimistic. Look to SNA and School Nutrition to continue to offer tools and resources to help your professional spirit survive—and thrive. SN+

Patricia Fitzgerald is editor of School Nutrition.
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