

Mental Health Matters Not Just for Students, but for Their Teachers Too

By [Shawnta S. Barnes](#) - October 10, 2017



This year marks the 25th anniversary of World Mental Health Day. This day was founded by the World Federation for Mental Health and is celebrated on October 10 each year. This year's theme is, "Mental health in the workplace."

Over the last few years, mindfulness and social emotional learning have become buzzwords in schools. Unfortunately, when these buzzwords are used they are typically in reference to students and do not include teachers. I believe for our students to be well and aware of their mental health, schools must address teachers' mental health too.

When I first transitioned from teacher to academic coach, I had these lofty goals of swooping in and partnering with teachers to help them improve the academic data in their classrooms. I quickly learned this would not be the reality. As a literacy coach, helping teachers master content was only a third of my job, another third was classroom management, and the other third was being a listening ear for the stress, anxiety, and depression teachers were enduring because of the school and/or personal issues.

Teachers struggling with mental health is not just an American issue; it plagues teachers worldwide and contributes to the teacher shortage. Almost half of teachers who participated in a survey in Scotland said their mental health was poor.

I didn't need to begin coaching teachers to know their stresses, anxieties, and bouts with depression. Teachers, many times, know who the struggling teachers are. We know who is taking too much medication to cope, drinking too much alcohol, engaging in other risky behavior and who lives are falling apart because they are trying to reach the bar of being a great educator that seems to keep moving ten feet higher any time they get within reach.

If I am going to be transparent, I must also note mental health has also been a struggle for me as an educator. Not only is this a taboo topic to speak about as a teacher, it is also taboo in the black community and the black church. Attending a black church throughout my childhood, it was almost sacrilege to even discuss mental health or to seek treatment from a therapist. I found this out the hard way as an adult.

I have suffered from chronic pain since I was thirteen. It wasn't until I was 23 that I found out why. I have a severe case of endometriosis. Finally knowing the root of my pain was a relief, but I also learned I had polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS) and fibroid tumors, one the size of a golf ball. The most heartbreaking news was to learn my fertility was compromised because of it. My doctor told me without any intervention, I had between ½-1% chance of ever having biological children.

I did what I do best; I made a plan. I was working on my master's at the time and I decided to begin paying for infertility treatments in addition to teaching middle school English. Typically, when I make a plan, I can work hard enough and make adjustments to make it work, but the infertility treatments kept failing. It was taking a toll on me mentally and my well-meaning church friends weren't helping. If you know anything about the black church, you know they have a saying for whatever your problem is.

I was told, "Remember to P.U.S.H. – pray until something happens." I thought, "For how long? I don't want to be like Sarah, in the bible, having a kid when I'm old enough to be a grandparent." I was told, "God has a blessing with your name on it." I thought, "How do you even know if it is a blessing for a child?" The one comment I heard the most that drove me crazy was, "The Lord never gives you more than you can bear." I thought, "But why does it feel unbearable?" It was the type of unbearable where I had to negotiate with myself to go to school each day.

To top it all off, I had a student who was pregnant who decided to confide in me about it. It was middle school; I wasn't her only teacher. Why me and why when my infertility treatments were failing? I decided I couldn't go on like this, so I got help. My husband and I entered counseling for couples who were struggling with infertility. It didn't change my life overnight, but it helped me become more focused and better functioning educator. It helped me for the road ahead. It helped me make a plan for my life if the treatments eventually worked or if they never worked.

The infertility treatments did eventually work, but I had a high risk identical twin pregnancy that resulted in me being rushed from my school to the hospital in an ambulance and spending four months on bedrest (two of those months in a hospital). Despite the four months of bedrest, my sons were born ten weeks early. They stayed in the NICU for two months and I had to learn how to walk

again. People remarked how well put together I was. I wasn't necessarily well put together, but I had learned how to be aware of my mental health and how to take care of myself. I learned to ask for help. I learned not to be ashamed to say I have been in counseling.

Some people who will read this know my story because my husband and I speak publicly about it, but unfortunately there is still a lot of stigma around saying you are under mental stress and saying you need to take a mental health day especially if you are a teacher. "You guys get breaks throughout the year; you don't need to take off any more days." That's not true. You don't know that teacher's struggle. You don't know that teacher's pain. You don't know how much time that teacher has been negotiating in the morning whether to go to work that day.

We must change the culture in schools to wellness for all – from students, to the bus driver, to the instructional assistant, to the teacher, to even the principal. How can teachers lead wellness and social emotional learning initiatives when they are not well themselves? Struggling with mental wellness should not be a taboo topic. Many teachers I have coached know I advocate for taking care of yourself. A few know I have been in counseling myself. I'm not ashamed to share my story and I hope I can help others not be ashamed to share their story and/or seek help. Mental health must be tackled in the workplace, but we also have to remember schools are workplaces too.