

It's okay to be okay too. Why calling out teachers' "toxic positivity" may backfire.

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As a team of university researchers and educators, we have been studying stress and resilience in teachers since the pandemic began. Based on responses from more than 2,200 teachers from across Canada who completed 92-question surveys in April, June, and September of 2020, and several follow-up interviews, we were able to gain a detailed understanding of the demands, resources, stress, and coping experienced by teachers. We have published widely in both academic journals and media to share teachers' voices and the lessons we learned from them.

As we were collecting and analyzing our data, there were two related dialogues taking place about issues akin to our research. First, we read headlines suggesting the effects of the pandemic could be viewed as trauma, and that both teachers and students would suffer long-term losses from their current educational experiences during COVID-19.

Second, we began to hear the term "toxic positivity" and witness verbal attacks on teachers who made positive or optimistic comments on social media. The catchphrase "It's OK to not be OK" gained traction as the mantra of the day.

These two separate dialogues seemed to accept pathology as the logical consequence of stress, while concurrently eroding attempts at recovery and resilience by those teachers who responded to the challenges in different ways. Given our discomfort with these observations, we decided to dig deeper into the science of toxic positivity, long-term effects of trauma, effects of positivity, and resilience to see if we could better understand the relationship between them.

Given that our study showed chronic and increasingly elevated stress in teachers from April to September, we were interested in looking at the long-term effects of both high levels and extended durations of stress. Specifically, teachers in our study reported a 10% deficit in coping with their stress in April and a 6% deficit in June, suggesting that teachers across Canada were adjusting to the realities and challenges of remote teaching. We were alarmed to find that teachers reported a 30% deficit in coping in late September, when most teachers were returning to

classroom instruction, but under unusual conditions due to COVID-19 safety requirements. Our September findings clearly demonstrated that additional resources are needed to meet demands. Considered together, the results of our three surveys suggested that teachers had the capacity to recover from abrupt, major changes to their teaching, but that repeated, incremental changes and challenges resulted in lower capacity for coping.

Our review of the literature revealed that the experiences of teachers' stress and coping could be understood through Bruce McEwen's concept of allostasis. **Allostasis** is the evolutionary capacity to respond to immediate threat through a fight, flight, and freeze response – an adaptation to the experience of acute stress. Humans have developed this capacity as a protective measure for survival. However, allostasis is a double-edged sword that can create safety, but can also cause harm. While allostasis has biologically prepared us to respond to emergencies, the cumulative burden of repeated exposures to stress leads to a chronic stress condition related to “allostatic load” – a situation that can have physiological and psychological health costs. Gauging by the survey and interview responses, it seems that this may be what was happening with Canadian teachers over the course of our study. They had begun to recover from the pivot to remote teaching by June but, instead of spending the summer continuing to recover, they entered July 2020 with a 6% deficit in coping that was never fully addressed. Between worrying about what would happen in the fall, preparing for possibly teaching remotely or in person (or both), and then returning to teaching situations that in many cases did not resemble typical classrooms and involved worry for the health of front-line educators and their families, teachers' stress increased greatly. As we cautioned during **an interview with CBC Radio**, the 6% deficit we found in June might have seemed small, but if left unaddressed it had the potential for damaging and enduring effects. It was the canary in the coal mine, and ignoring it could have serious consequences for both teachers and students.

Is there an alternative to predictions of long-term costs to teachers' health as a result of the pandemic? As we know, good science always considers the counter-argument, and we found an equally convincing one in the work on resilience by **George Bonnano**. His research challenges the concept of distress and illness as a singular response to trauma and disruption, suggesting that there is a different and

more typical path that can result from traumatic events. With reference to people who had experienced terrible challenges such as being victims in the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, Bonnano found that while some people developed post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), most demonstrated resilience. This is not to dismiss the real and important needs of those who experience PTSD, but instead points out that pathology is not the only, or even the most typical, response to traumatic events. Canadian Senator and researcher **Dr. Stanley Kutcher** noted that there is an increased public perception that negative emotions are an indicator of pathology and illness. In contrast, Kutcher suggested that negative emotions are an important part of addressing life's challenges and essential when adapting for the future. Without such emotions, he argued, we cannot develop resilience.

Bonanno found that one of the predictors of resilience as opposed to pathology was a positive outlook. This is where the ideas of balance and toxic positivity come into play. Toxic positivity seeks to **reject, deny, or displace** any acknowledgement of the stress, negativity, and possible disabling features of trauma, and instead looks only through rose-coloured glasses. In contrast, a positive outlook acknowledges both the negative, challenging aspects as well as the more optimistic frames and pathways. Optimism, unlike toxic positivity, encompasses both reality and pathology instead of ignoring potential and actual psychological disability experienced by some people in response to trauma.

Confusing optimism with toxic positivity comes with two kinds of costs. First, by mistakenly interpreting and silencing optimism as toxic positivity, individuals who embrace positivity as a coping mechanism are denied this support for their own resilience. Given Bonnano's findings about the importance of optimism for resilience, we cannot afford to squelch this resource for teachers who need it to maintain their well-being. Second, **observations of those we view as important to us serve as exemplars of how we normalize responses to change.** If there are no longer voices of optimism because they have been silenced due to accusations of toxic positivity, then pathology and negativity by default become the exemplars. Just as it is OK to not be OK (and to seek supports for this response to what is clearly a very stressful situation), it is also OK to be OK.

Collectively, we are all going through a very challenging time together. Each of us will need to use everything we can – both internally and externally – to face the future beyond the pandemic. However, teachers work in a variety of settings, with a spectrum of resources and challenges, and a range of student and family needs – not every teacher is “in the same boat” during this pandemic, even though we are all experiencing the same storm. There are other pathways to understanding teacher responses and contexts besides the false dichotomy between pathology and toxic positivity. In fact, a person can be both optimistic and realistic at the same time. Therefore, it is important to consider the cost to individuals as well as groups when we call out presumed “toxic positivity” – when in reality we are all just doing the best we can with the resources we have.

The pandemic does not define us – it reveals us. Let it reveal our best selves, as teachers who show compassion, support, grace, and acceptance for both ourselves and our colleagues as we all respond to and recover from the challenges of COVID-19 in the best (yet different) ways we can.

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## MEET THE EXPERT(S)



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