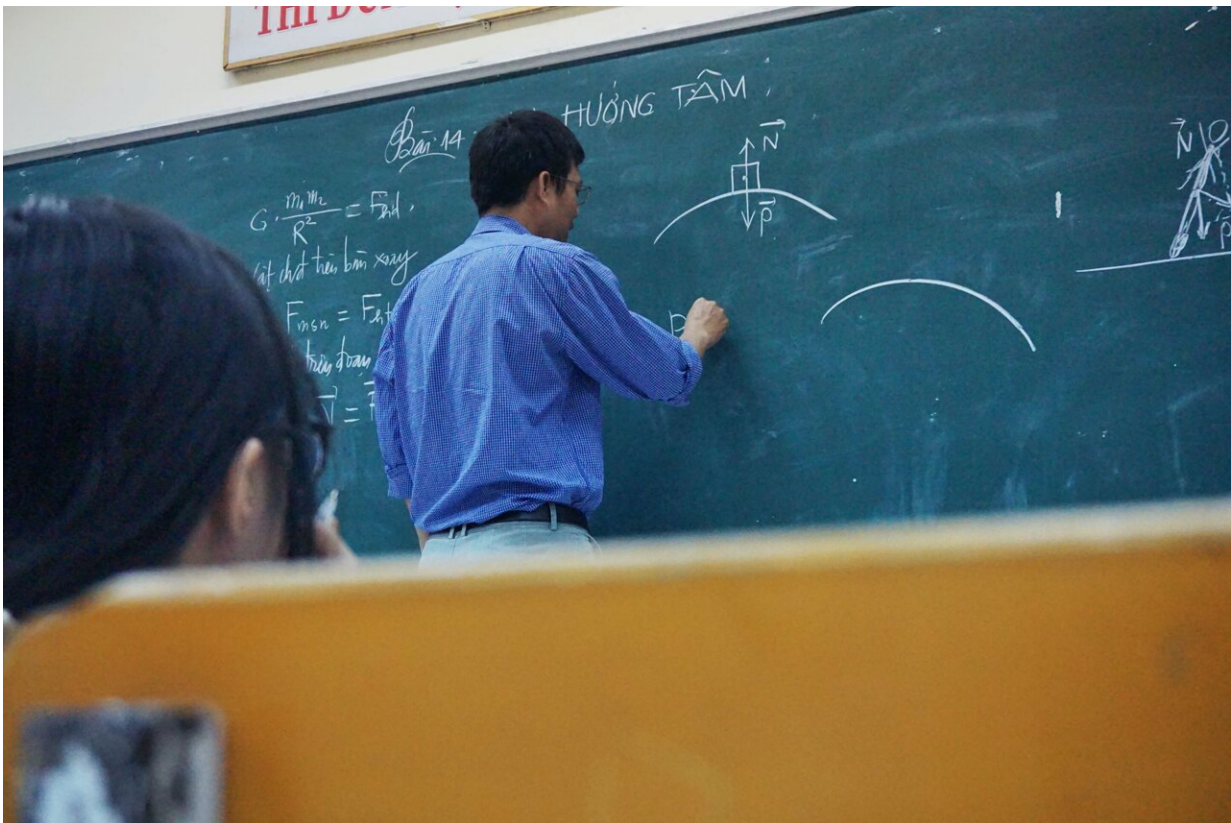


Meditation and exercise can alleviate teacher stress

August 23 2022, by Robin Lally



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Teachers in grades K-12 who combined meditation and aerobic exercise for as little as two hours a week at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic suffered less anxiety, depression and overall stress, according

to a Rutgers neuroscientist.

A new study in *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* found that a combination of mental and physical training that included meditation and aerobic exercise significantly reduced anxiety and depressive and [negative thoughts](#) in [teachers](#) from the northeast US who were involved in the study. The exercises were performed for one-hour twice a week, over a six-week period.

"In this study we focused on the ongoing stress and trauma that many people were experiencing during the first summer of the COVID-19 pandemic," said Tracey Shors, distinguished professor in the Department of Psychology and Center for Collaborative Neuroscience at the Rutgers-New Brunswick School of Arts and Sciences "It was an especially scary time because many people were becoming ill and dying and yet there were no vaccines or even much knowledge about the virus."

"Not knowing what would happen in the next school year left teachers under an extraordinary amount of stress," she said.

Two years later, educators across the country say a teacher shortage throughout the country is at a crisis. A Gallup poll from June found that 44 percent of K-12 teachers feel burned out often or always compared with 30 percent of all other workers.

"We began the study when most elementary and [high school teachers](#) were out of school for the summer but were becoming more and more anxious about going back into the classroom in the fall," Shors said. "They did not know if they could keep their students or themselves safe and were worried about teaching children online with little experience or support for this new form of education. For many there are still fears."

Shors developed MAP (mental and physical) training for those with

depression, trauma and stress-related symptoms and has studied its effects on different groups, including women who have been sexually assaulted, women living with HIV and women who are homeless.

This recent study, which focused on 71 teachers, 58 who went through the mental and physical training and 13 who did not, was the first time the research was conducted virtually, with participants accessing the class via Zoom.

Shors and doctoral student Docia Demmin began each class with a "brain bit"—a short piece of information about the brain that teachers could use to help them stay focused and motivated. Next came a simple but effortful form of meditation for 20 minutes, followed by 10 minutes of very slow walking meditation and then 30 minutes of [aerobic exercise](#).

After six weeks, the teachers reported much less anxiety and depression as well as fewer negative thoughts, Shors said. They reported less secondary traumatic stress, which was likely related to their worries about the pandemic and how it was affecting their students and loved ones, she said.

"They said they were sleeping better and felt more cognitively flexible with greater control over their thought processes," Shors said. "They felt less work-related stress with greater self-compassion. All in all, this relatively short intervention enhanced their overall mental health and well-being."

Shors, who has authored a book *Everyday Trauma*, says it is important to understand just how the brain responds to trauma—whether it is an unexpected event like a violent attack, car wreck or natural disaster or a [trauma](#) that can last longer like a [chronic illness](#), discrimination, or a pandemic like we have dealt with for more than two years.

"It helps to understand how the brain responds to these two forms of traumas and how they impact the physical structure of our brain," Shors said. "Because once we do, we are more likely to engage in lifestyles and activities that can mitigate the damage and, in some cases, prevent it from happening in the first place."

More information: Docia L. Demmin et al, Mental and physical training with meditation and aerobic exercise improved mental health and well-being in teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic, *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* (2022). [DOI: 10.3389/fnhum.2022.847301](https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2022.847301)

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