

As a school leader in today’s world, you are certainly feeling stressed, overwhelmed, and pulled in too many directions. You are attempting to meet the needs of your students and you staff, and it often feels like those are competing interests. In these situations, we inevitably start to feel helpless, and our brains look for ways to cope. But often, the way our brains automatically cope with helplessness results in feelings, thoughts, and behaviors that aren’t effective for anyone and can make situations worse.

Consider these tips below:

INSTEAD OF...	TRY THIS...	Why?
<p>Response to helplessness → Lack of empathy; shutting down emotionally</p> <p>“This is just policy; our hands are tied.” “I’m sorry. There’s nothing we can do.” <i>Why are they being so demanding? Suck it up!</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Imagine how teachers are feeling; sit with this perspective and let yourself feel it with them</i> ▪ <i>Release your judgments and set aside your agenda</i> ▪ “I can only imagine how you’re feeling. Tell me more about it” ▪ “What are your fears? What is the hardest part?” 	<p>Expressing emotions gives people a sense of relief and hope, even if we can’t change their situation; Limiting emotional expression to “keep the peace” can create more distress</p>
<p>Response to helplessness → Hyper-positivity or optimism</p> <p>“We’re a team! We have to stay positive!” “We have to stay strong for our students. Keep smiling!” <i>If we just hang in there, we’ll get through this.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Remember that vulnerability is a sign of strength; be genuine and realistic with staff</i> ▪ <i>Look for ways to foster authentic connection</i> ▪ “This situation is overwhelming, to say the least. It’s okay to not be okay. None of us are.” 	<p>People under stress often feel invalidated by hyper-positivity and prefer to be met with genuine reflection.</p>
<p>Response to helplessness → Avoidance, hopelessness</p> <p><i>There’s nothing I can do; everything is so uncertain; there’s no point in talking about it.</i> “All we can do is take care of ourselves.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Remind yourself that it’s okay to not have the answers</i> ▪ “You may have noticed me being distant; it’s only because I’m feeling helpless” ▪ <i>Set aside time to think about the things you’re avoiding (see Worry Time video on WISE’s YouTube channel)</i> ▪ <i>Prevent sadness/hopelessness by staying engaged in preferred activities</i> 	<p>We all naturally want to avoid situations that are stressful, but it limits our ability to connect, which protects us.</p>



WISE

MedStar Georgetown
Center for Wellbeing in
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School Leader
Supports

Additional Tips for Reflective and Empathetic Communication

Embody Curiosity and Growth Mindset

- ◇ Remind yourself that you can learn something from everyone around you, and this will help you grow
- ◇ When you are listening, clear your mind of your own thoughts or anticipated responses
- ◇ Remain deeply engaged in what the other person is saying, as if you were an alien on earth and are hearing someone speak for the first time

Show You're Listening

- ◇ Ask a question to clarify (e.g., “When you said _____, what did you mean?”) or dig deeper (e.g., “Then what happened?” “What were you feeling?”)
- ◇ Restate what’s being said, either exactly or in your own words
- ◇ Make sure that your body language conveys listening (eye contact, open stance, relaxed posture, soft facial expression)

Validate the Other

- ◇ Show you understand (“I completely get that,” “I understand”)
- ◇ Validate the emotion (“I’m sure that is stressful,” “You’re upset because this is important to you”)
- ◇ Normalize the other’s thoughts and feelings (“It makes sense that you feel that way”)

Additional Resources

[WISE’s YouTube Channel](#) – Brief videos focused on feasible self-care strategies

[TeacherWISE](#) – A self-paced self-care program for educators

[WISE’s Wellbeing Text Program](#) – Weekly texts for your wellbeing, including resources, videos, and encouraging messages