



You might say...

"I wish I had a holiday soon—I'm getting so worn out. When I get close to students I hear such terrible stories about their lives I can hardly bear it. I try to protect myself by not learning too much about what some of them are dealing with. I don't know how they cope with all that and school. As if that's not enough I am always having to fill in forms and reports to be "accountable" for the piddly dollars they give me and it takes forever. My administrator doesn't really get why I am so exhausted when I only work with such small groups. She tells me I get too involved and that I'm not a counsellor. I'm too tired in the evenings to do more than slump in front of the TV—and I definitely don't have any energy for anybody else in my life who is needy. It's not how I want to live. Sometimes I feel I'm just looking for someone to blame and I worry that it may be time to look for a new job!"

I'm too tired: I'm not good at taking care of myself.

...but did you know:

When we put out more than we get back we can quickly and easily feel depleted. Literacy work is extremely complex yet there is little recognition of all the elements of this work. Literacy work is also usually underfunded and poorly paid. You may be hunting for funds, dealing with funders' demands, managing the administration, supporting tutors, and working directly with students.

Most programs cannot afford to employ as many practitioners, or to have as large and comfortable a space, as are really needed. There is rarely funding for counsellors and other supports for practitioners or students. Scarcity is a reality of the work and can lead us to feel there is never enough of anything—including time to do a good job, or appreciation for our hard work.



We need to include ourselves in the circle of care.

The hard times students have been through can make it challenging for them to learn and so leave them, and us, frustrated with the lack of success. Students are often struggling with the lack of many resources and may feel humiliated by workers in many of the services which are supposed to help them. They may live in areas where violence is widespread on the street along with the drug trade and have few options to get out. They may be terrified for their children and worry about their future. In this context it can be exhausting to work on reading and writing, for both teachers and students. We may all feel helpless to affect the bigger picture.

Some of us get involved in adult literacy work because we are eager to create change, or we may want to “help” others. Our own past experiences may shape this desire and contribute to our empathy for others. But it can exhaust us when those we are working with either remind us of our own issues, or seem to have such big issues that we feel we can not complain about anything.

Many of us just keep pushing ourselves rather than finding ways to slow down and take better care of ourselves. If we are to hold on to well-being and continue to help ourselves and support others, we need to find ways to stop and figure out the best ways to nurture ourselves. As Edmonton therapist Heather Bain suggested, we need to “include ourselves in the circle of care.”



What can I do to help everybody learn?

1. Address self-care in the program


- **Meet with a counsellor as a group or individually to take care of your own issues and strengthen your work with students.** If your setting doesn't include counsellors, try to find special funding, placement students, or counsellors who will volunteer their time.
- **Talk about self-care in staff meetings, share ideas and resources, encourage everyone to look after themselves.** Try to shift the common culture of valuing over-work and replace it with one that values self-care, regular rest and food breaks, and good boundary setting.
- **Address issues of safety.** Make sure everyone is aware of a safety plan and what to do if crises erupt, or if anyone is threatening the safety of themselves or others.
- **Create a culture in the program of acknowledging and valuing the hard work everyone does: the practitioners, volunteer tutors, board members, and students.** Don't ignore the need to value your colleagues and yourself, thinking only about students and volunteers.

2. Take on self-care

- **Move through hard places; work with the emotions and feelings of being overwhelmed when they come up—don't stuff them down.** If you find that working with people who were mistreated reminds you of your own experiences, or makes you extremely angry or sad, access your supports. Meeting with a therapist or elder might help work through your own issues.
- **Gather your strength: make sure you take time to escape, to play, to have fun, to nurture and to replenish yourself through relaxing, physical exercise, or time spent in nature.**
- **Create and express yourself.** Make space in the program and in your life to tell your stories and to create, using whatever media draws you.

3. Help learners to take on their own self-care

- **Include self-care as part of the curriculum.** Help students to learn to take care of themselves when they feel bad or overwhelmed. Encourage them to think about how to set their own boundaries and take care of themselves at home too.
- **Provide conditions for self-care.** Where possible include healthy snacks and drinking water for everyone in the program.
- **Create a learning environment which nurtures all parts of the self.** For example think about sounds, sights, physical comfort, emotional safety, and ways to provide inspiration and nurture the spirit.



Where can I find more information and ideas?

Each of the six information sheets in this set will look at a learning problem through a typical journal entry and give more information about what might lead to the problems practitioners see.

Go to: <http://www.learningandviolence.net/>

The entire **Taking Care of Self** section is full of activities to explore:

<http://www.learningandviolence.net/takecare.htm>

What to do **When you feel bad** gives an easy-to-read list of things to do:

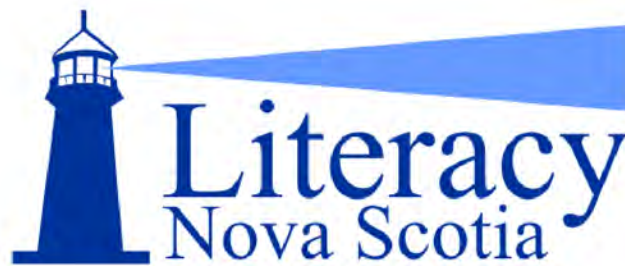
<http://www.learningandviolence.net/helpself/feelbad.htm>

Helping others learn shows many of the conditions for learning, especially the video about creating Sacred Space:

<http://www.learningandviolence.net/helpothr/hlpothers.htm>

This is one in a set of six information sheets for adult literacy practitioners on learning and violence, written by Jenny Horsman, Spiral Community Resource Group. Funded by literacy coalitions in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Alberta, NWT and BC. October 2009. For more information: <http://www.learningandviolence.net/>

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What is literacy?


Literacy is **the** essential skill.


It is the ability to use printed information to function in society, at work and in the family.


It is the combination of thinking and social skills we need to analyze and use information to control our own lives, achieve our goals and develop our knowledge and potential.

How to reach us...

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