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Teaching Mindfulness and Self-Care in a Pandemic

Last week, we started our classes for this semester. I am teaching science to approximately 150 senior high school students, and due to the pandemic, classes have shifted to online learning. Teachers and students alike are stressed and anxious because of the pandemic, and many of us are worried about what the future will hold. As we began the semester, I saw an opportunity to create a Day of Compassion.

To me, compassion involves having genuine concern for the welfare and well-being of others, especially when they are in need. In these trying times, all of us are in need to one extent or another, and as a teacher, I wanted students to learn mindfulness and stress management techniques to reduce the tension and anxiety they were experiencing. I'm a mental health advocate, so my long-term goal is to enhance students' overall well-being—not just teach them about chemistry, biology, and physics.

Accordingly, I held my Day of Compassion on the first day of class, and during that day, I taught students mindfulness and self-care techniques such as setting up routines, valuing pastimes, exercising, doing breathing exercises, and reflecting upon life (for details on a few of the techniques, please see [this slideshow](#)). We shared the anxieties we were feeling—especially anxieties about online learning—and we shared some practices that each of us could do to get through the day. I also told students about some studies and narratives showing how mindfulness and stress management techniques could be beneficial to them.



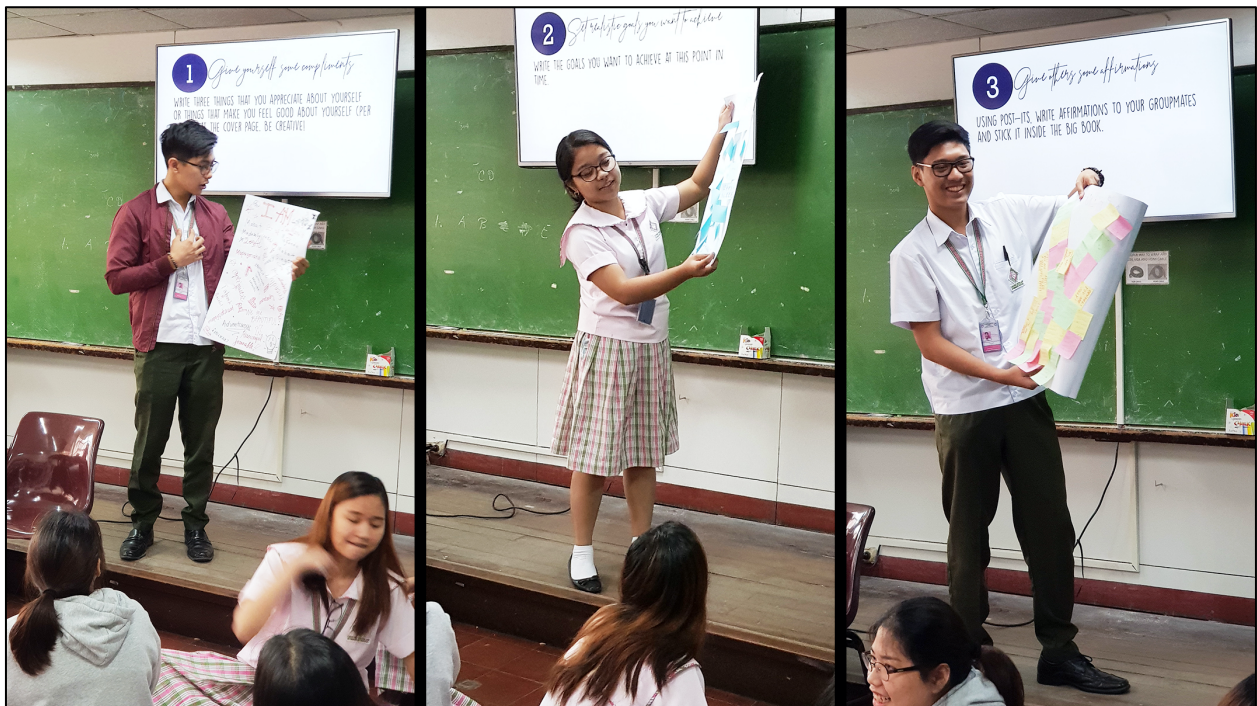
Students working together to learn mindfulness and self-care techniques

At the end of the session, we pledged to support each other in times of stress, both in terms of academics and in personal life. Students seemed noticeably happier than they were at the beginning of the class, and they expressed a desire for more sessions that would address the difficulties they were facing.

After the Day of Compassion

Because students often experience stress at home as well as at school, I encouraged them to explain mindfulness and self-care techniques to members of their family in the hope that these techniques might reduce stress on the home front. I also shared information about these techniques with staff members in the high school's guidance and discipline departments, which led to the adoption of certain lessons in homeroom sessions throughout the school.

One particularly gratifying result from this project is that students told me later in the semester that they were continuing to use the breathing exercises they learned on the Day of Compassion. Some students also thanked me for teaching them how certain cognitive distortions can interfere with their positive thoughts and feelings. Others said they were better able to manage negative thoughts, feel more "in control" of themselves, and reduce their level of distress.



Students giving class presentations on effective self-care techniques

Some Reflections

Speaking personally, it would be great if I could be the "Day of Compassion me" every day. I like the "Day of Compassion me" more than the "normal me," because being compassionate makes me feel happy and fulfilled.

Unfortunately, I'm not always the "Day of Compassion me." In some cases, I focus on myself and my own problems, and I occasionally fall prey to the bystander effect by believing that I'm not responsible for intervening or that other people are better suited to help. Still, as an educator, I do my best to be compassionate toward students, especially when it comes to their mental health and well-being.

Practicing compassion makes us kind, and kindness increases our life satisfaction. Moreover, compassion strengthens our social connections because it entails interacting and empathizing with others. When we address other people's suffering, compassion also leads us to reflect on ourselves, our deepest values, and the wider world around us.

Of course, when we spend time, money, and other resources to help those in need, it's always possible that these acts of generosity will be abused or taken for granted. Another potential problem is that the people who are helped may become dependent if they expect that another person will rescue them whenever a problem arises. Nonetheless, I think the benefits of living compassionately outweigh the costs, and I further believe that the risks of being exploited can be minimized with clear and open communication.

I love what I experienced on Day of Compassion, and I plan to encourage compassion in others. One way to generate more compassion in society is by modeling it and letting other people know about the benefits of helping those in need. In most cases, being compassionate is not hard to do. In fact, after this class assignment, I intend to practice greater compassion in my own life. By making a conscious effort to see people's suffering and respond to it, I hope to improve their mental health and well-being during these challenging times.

Epilogue from Professor Plous

Because the feedback that Francheska received from students, parents, guardians, and coworkers was so positive, she continued teaching mindfulness techniques to roughly 100 students after her Day of Compassion had ended. Once her fellow teachers, guidance counsellors, and other staff members learned about her work, they also taught some of the mindfulness and self-care lessons that she developed to another 400 students (e.g., lessons on anti-anxiety breathing techniques and ways to manage stress). In sum, then, a total of 650 students learned mindfulness and self-care techniques as a result of Francheska's Day of Compassion.