

MENTAL HEALTH CODE RED: A TEACHER'S GUIDE

No matter what Code our community is in at the moment, you are in Code Red. These are new conditions. Everything has changed. How you adjust as an educator is the most important aspect of this new reality.

We know what Code Red looks like for schools: socially distanced students; teachers cleaning furniture; less PD; less prep time; altered teaching practices; at times radically adjusting your curriculum to suit the new reality; no eating lunch with other staff; attending to students on digital platforms while trying to teach the ones in your room; moving classrooms or running between several classrooms at once; straining your voice as you try to project your voice through your mask; straining your ears to hear your students' muffled, masked voices; masks causing rashes; managing the anxiety in the background warning that all your students could be sent home at any time; the anxiety that you and your family could get sick at any time; the fear that someone in your class or school could get sick and you wouldn't know about it until too late. And the list goes on.

We at EAP hear you: those who called, those still waiting to call, those yet to call, and those too overwhelmed to call. We hear you and we are here for you. Consistently our message to the hundreds of members we have spoken to since March 2019 is:

Whether or not your school is in Code Red, from a mental health perspective, you likely are.

To manage it, we need a **Code Red Mental Health Response**.

We are not being dramatic. In our EAP sessions since March, the most common response was "If things continue like this I will burn out. It's not a matter of if, but when."

Everything around you is in a constant state of flux. Many of you—dedicated, tireless, empathic, and passionate professionals—are trying to stay afloat. Many of you are doing what you have always done. You work the incredibly long hours, tried to give 110% every day, differentiated your lessons to meet the complex range of student needs in your class, completed your marking on time, and have planned at least a few weeks to months ahead of your class. You have been required to pivot over and over again to meet changing demands and needs. Often, you do this while preserving as much energy as you can for your family, and maybe, some magic reserves for yourself.

A Code Red response means you will do your best, guided by existing and shifting conditions, in order for you to stay at work and retain your wellbeing. It might sound simple, but it's not.

Modifications and adaptations to the conditions as you understand them will vary for each of you. Some of you may need to revive old lessons, even if they are not perfect for your specific group. Some may implement more extensive curriculum adaptations that incorporate safety measures (masks, distancing) and other changing directives impose. Some of you will need to work with your grade group to incorporate teacher friendly activities. Others may implement more movie days for your students than you've ever considered. Some of you will need integrate less teacher directed time with that allows you space "to breathe", a moment to reset and self-regulate. Some will need to take regular mental health days whereas others will not because putting a sub plan in place requires more work. That's okay. Some will need to literally have an alarm clock set for 4:30 PM strongly advising it is time to go home.

Some may be unable to do these things. And that's okay.

Part of a Code Red response may include shutting off all screen time and school work in the evening to begin a bedtime routine at 8 PM, even though you have piles of school and home work left. Prioritizing physical activity and exercise over piles of undone home work, even as simple as a five-minute walk outdoors, may be helpful. Have you tried listening to a Five-Minute Self-Compassion Break in your car to and from work? Some of you may find it helpful to eat simple, frozen meals. Is it an evening for others in the family to plan the meal prep? Is it possible to ask family and non-teacher friends to drop off food?

Are we being dramatic? No.

This is a crisis. We need to respond accordingly.

A Code Red response means your best practises as an educator will look different. The idea of doing your best and it looking different and less than what you normally think of as optimal might be uncomfortable, and at worst, terrifying. Most of you will land somewhere in the middle: you'll feel stuck, guilty, and anxious. Acknowledge the feelings and speak to them. At this time gently let them this go in this time of a very new "normal". It calls us to redefine it by using your creativity, common sense and your professionalism.

In this unprecedented time, ask yourself: What is a Code Red mental health response for you?

How do you have to adjust your life, your output, your expectations at school and at home to stay at work? Listen to yourself, talk to your trusted colleagues, friends, and family members. There is no single and no absolute answer. We are in a process, figuring it out as we go.

Remember: despite implementing all the self-care, wisdom, and shifting that is required, you may still burn out. Maybe you have a mental health condition, a physical health issue or you are caring for an ailing parent or child with complex needs. Or maybe you are already burnt out, well, because being an educator is extremely challenging—especially during COVID. You don't need to justify it. The Code Red response doesn't mean you need to stay at work. Do what is best for you. You are the one who best can.

Finally, if there's one thing we've learned at EAP, it's that members cannot work in a pre-pandemic way in a COVID-19 world and expect to survive.

So much of your energy right now is required to adjust to the ever-changing realities of COVID-19, to accommodate your teaching practices and vision. Recalibrate. You are your students' best teacher. You are best suited to make those accommodations. Don't try to keep giving what you don't have because, sooner than later, you won't be able to give anything.

Take care of yourself so you can take care of those around you. Get your oxygen mask on first. In this time of crisis, you are called on to take better care of yourself than ever before. We are with you.

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**If you or someone you know is in crisis and at risk, [click here](#).
Resources throughout Manitoba are listed.**