

Holding it Together When You're Falling Apart

I walked into my principal's office an absolute wreck. I knew my home life was affecting my work life, and I just knew that was why she called me to her office. What was I going to tell her? I couldn't see how anything was going to change overnight at home. My son had just started middle school and within the first month, I was seeing behaviors I had never seen before. He hated school. He cried every night before going to sleep because he knew in the morning he was going to have to go to school. He was completely irrational about it. He felt trapped like a caged animal, and he couldn't leave. He began having what I soon figured out were panic attacks. He couldn't shake them or snap out of it. It was nonstop stress from the moment he woke up until I had to literally drag him to the car to take him to school kicking and screaming. I worked on base, so I still had a 15 minute drive to get to work myself. Just the night before he said he wished he could just disappear and never come back. What do you do with that? Well, I fell apart. And when my principal called me to her office, I lost it.

I came in and sat down in the chair in front of her desk. She stood up and smiled and came around and sat in the chair next to me and turned it to face me. She put her hand over mine and looked at me and said, "Laura, have you ever flown in a plane with your child?" I nodded through my tears that I had. She continued, "What do the flight attendants tell you to do if the plane loses air pressure? Who do you put the mask on first?" Thinking of my son who was in such a dark place, I said, "I'd put it on my son!" She slowly shook her head and said, "No, you have to put it on yourself first, so you can help him. If you pass out first, you can't help him. Starting right now, you have to put the oxygen mask on yourself. You cannot help your son, if you go down first. I am sending you home today and for the rest of the week. You need to rest and take care of yourself. Don't worry about sub plans, I will take care of it. Now go home."

I cannot tell you what an impact that made on me that day. For the first time, I realized that I was spending all my time worrying and focusing on the problem, that I took no time to take care of myself.

Teachers, we are living in unprecedented times. You have had to learn new systems, new curriculum, and new programs on the fly because this virus has turned our educational world upside down. Last year, you were crisis teaching and did an amazing job by the way! This year, you are *teaching!* You are trying to do in 3 ½ hours what usually takes all day. You are cramming five days of content into two...or at least trying to! Most of you are teaching from home which means you will inevitably be distracted beyond measure all day. Oh, and not to mention those of you with children of your own going to school! Not only are you teaching classes of your own, but also monitoring your own children! YOU deserve a medal!

All this is to say, realize that you are human. Your superpower may be teaching, but your physical body needs some kind of exercise and rest. Your brain and eyes need a break from the computer screen. Other parts of your body need to be extracted from your chair. The biggest thing you can do for yourself right now is set some boundaries. Determine your work hours, and when those work hours are done, shut your school laptop, take off your teacher hat, and live your at-home life. It is so easy when working from home to just keep answering emails and phone calls from parents and students until all hours of the night and early in the morning. You *have* to draw the line somewhere. If you don't, you are going to burn out. You are essential. Your students need you, your colleagues need you, and your principal needs you. However, your ability to do your job well depends on you putting your physical and mental health first.

I took that five days back then to do just that. I went to the doctor and took her advice. I was then able to begin helping my son. There were days when I wondered if we were going to get through it. But guess what? I did and he did. So what happened to that young man that hated going to school? He just graduated from college

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and is pursuing a career in the medical field! That's right--he's choosing to go to school now! This is a hard season y'all, but seasons pass and this too, shall pass.