

# Don't Quit: 5 Strategies for Recovering After Your Worst Day Teaching

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Ice crystallized on the windshield, then a tire burst on the way to school, making you late. By the time you arrived, the computer (with the video clip and presentation cued up) froze. Minutes later, Jason pulled the fire alarm while you tried to catch up on parent emails. During lunch duty, a student was punched in the nose. Your nose is stuffy while you explain to the principal right before an IEP meeting why your plans haven't been submitted yet. The day trudges along. . . At last, the final bell rings, and in your first quiet moment of the day, thoughts of leaving the teaching profession suddenly seem, well, *right*.

It's that moment when you want to say, "I quit!"

We don't talk about those feelings because we're supposed to be like those heroic teacher-as-savior figures that permeate popular narratives about our work. And yet. . .

Here's a secret. Most teachers, at some point, feel like giving up. Most feel the weight of not having done enough, feel the frustrations of negative media attention, and feel challenged by apathetic or disruptive students. Sometimes, the limits and loneliness of the lighthouse keeper are overwhelming. That's when the enormity of our task feels insurmountable and we despair.

Driving home from such a day, we can be tempted to call in sick and plan for a sub. Sometimes that's the right call. But there is another opportunity, too. You can take that empathy and understanding normally reserved for students and focus it on yourself. You can consider some strategies for gently accepting your circumstances, reflecting on what is needed, and preparing to return tomorrow. Consider these strategies:

## 1. Find a Friendly Shoulder

Call a trusted colleague, preferably one who's been teaching a long time. Vent. Cry. Laugh hysterically and have a glass of beer or wine. Tell them about your struggles and frustrations. All teachers can recount a story of a crazed student or parent. Just ask them. Take this time to break the isolation of our work. No one escapes from teaching -- or for that matter, any profession -- without wondering if he or she made the right choice. Not even Teachers of the Year. In other words, dear colleague, *you are not alone*.

## 2. Breathe

This sounds simple, and it is. Sit with the discomfort and notice it. Acknowledge frustrations of the day and then let them go. Listen to your self-talk and try to be kind to yourself. Practice slow breathing. If possible, carry this habit into your workday. It will create space for less reactivity and a more grounded emotional stance.

## 3. Plan for Community

Consider pausing the scheduled lesson, and instead, take time to engage in team-building activities with your students. An English teacher that I read about, after weeks of essays and test prep, surprised his 12th grade class with a game of kickball out on the blacktop. The sun shone, the kids ran like mad, and everyone came back laughing. It was crazy, unanticipated, and utterly glorious.

## 4. Prioritize

Do stacks of papers line your desk? Are parents waiting for your email? Are there field trip permission slips to process? Is the lab set up for tomorrow? Here's what to do when the onslaught of tasks overwhelms you -- write a list of everything that needs to get done in the next two days. (Yes. *Write it down*. The physical act of writing provides a sense of control.) Look at this list and choose the top three tasks. These three are the *must-dos*, urgent actions that will help you survive until the next day. After completing the must-dos, cross them off your list and go to sleep early.

## 5. Get Perspective

Teaching need not consume you. Devoting all of our waking hours to teaching primes us for burnout. And burnout is real. It happens when the demands and expectations of our work drown out our joy. Your other roles are important, too: friend, spouse, sibling, hiker, reader, dancer, joke-teller, or baker -- a million other energizing possibilities. These other facets to your personality might need attention. So forget work over the weekend. Go to the forest or to a ball game. Get a massage. Try not to let happiness slip away. We can be good, caring, rigorous teachers, but sacrificing our personal lives is a costly and unsustainable price.

"There are stirrings of life in discontent," wrote E.M. Forster, meaning that even in frustration and despair, a small flame wants to warm us. Life -- ours and those of our students -- nudges us. It is not wild or stormy, and chances are that it's barely a flicker. And on the worst school day, it may not be felt at all. But trust that life is there. And when you open your classroom door tomorrow morning, you will find it.

Tell us what you do to recover from bad days.