

Supporting SEND provision and staff wellbeing:

A guide for leaders
and managers

Introduction

This guide has been created with Lynn How, a SENCO with over 20 years' teaching experience. In it, we unpack how leaders and managers can take care of themselves and their teams, against the reality of an education system under increasing pressure.

Teachers and support staff often provide SEND provision with limited resources and budget, leading to an increased toll on their mental and physical wellbeing. This issue is compounded by the impact of poverty, cuts to essential services for families and an influx of new teachers, who may not always feel fully prepared for the unique challenges of supporting the range of needs in their classrooms.



“Every class has pupils with SEND and most now have children with complex needs. These needs often include medical or mental health needs but the funding isn’t available to properly meet these needs.”

State of Education: SEND —
NEU survey, 2024

“Navigating the system to provide my child with the SEND support he deserves is challenging, despite being a teacher and knowing and understanding the system myself...his teachers and school face the same lack of time and resources as every other school.”

Lynn How, SENCO

Many staff members also balance professional responsibilities with supporting their own children with additional needs, facing the same system in crisis. And while the focus is often on supporting pupils and their families, it’s crucial we also recognise the hidden cost to all the education staff who are giving so much of themselves every day.

Identifying the challenges

We came together with NASS, a panel of school leaders, SENCOs, and SEND experts to explore the pressures facing education staff. And their message was clear. If we want to keep skilled, passionate staff in SEND education, we need to take their mental wellbeing seriously.

The panel highlighted the distinct challenges involved in working with children who require additional support in their learning due to learning difficulties or disabilities, including:

- The scale of need: This includes supporting young people with significant learning difficulties, mental health conditions and behavioural challenges.
- Managing emotionally charged situations: Many SEND staff provide intensive one-to-one support, sometimes in crisis situations.

- Working in isolation: In mainstream schools, SENCOs and learning support staff can feel disconnected from colleagues.
- Navigating systemic pressures: Lack of funding, resources and external specialist support means staff must fill gaps in provision.

Check out the full [webinar](#) where we discuss these challenges with practical advice or download the infographic featured on the webinar webpage for some quick insights from this event.

Support for school leaders and managers

We know that system-level change is essential. Schools can only do so much within the constraints of the current system. However, that doesn't mean there aren't positive, meaningful actions that you can start implementing to support yourself and your team.

Section one: Taking care of you

“Secure your own oxygen mask first.”

Our Teacher Wellbeing Index continues to find senior leaders report the highest levels of stress compared to other roles, with increasing signs of burnout and exhaustion. And in the midst of high-pressured responsibilities and system strains, it's easy to overlook your own wellbeing. But the reality is, if you're running on empty, you can't effectively support your team or pupils.

Caring for yourself is not an indulgence. It's a leadership necessity.

So, how can you protect your wellbeing while leading others through increasingly complex and emotionally demanding roles?



1 Know you can't have all the answers

It's okay to not always have the answers at work. And having to be the 'knower' or right all the time is a heavy load to carry. Admitting uncertainty creates space for collaboration, learning and can foster trust. Next time something comes up you're not sure on, can you get curious?

Try asking yourself:

- What would happen if you paused for moment before answering a question?
- Do you need more information?
- Can your colleagues provide it?
- Can you ask any clarifying questions?

If you often feel the pressure to respond straight away, you may want to keep some phrases in your pocket for when you're caught off guard, for example:

- “I'm not sure, what do you think?”
- “I'll need to think it over, can I come back to you?”

If you're used to having an answer right away, this might feel uncomfortable at first and take some practice. Be kind to yourself.

2

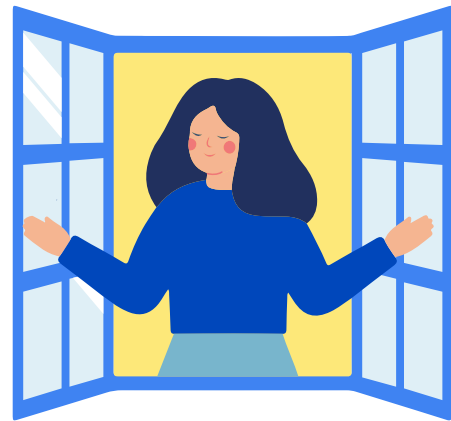
Recognise your emotions as reasonable responses to challenging situations

Stressed, worried, exhausted? These aren't signs of failure. They're signs that you're human and that you care. Emotional responses are natural, especially in high-pressure environments. Starting by acknowledging your feelings as valid can help you create balance and makes space for your team to do the same. To do this, it can also help to understand your Window of Tolerance.

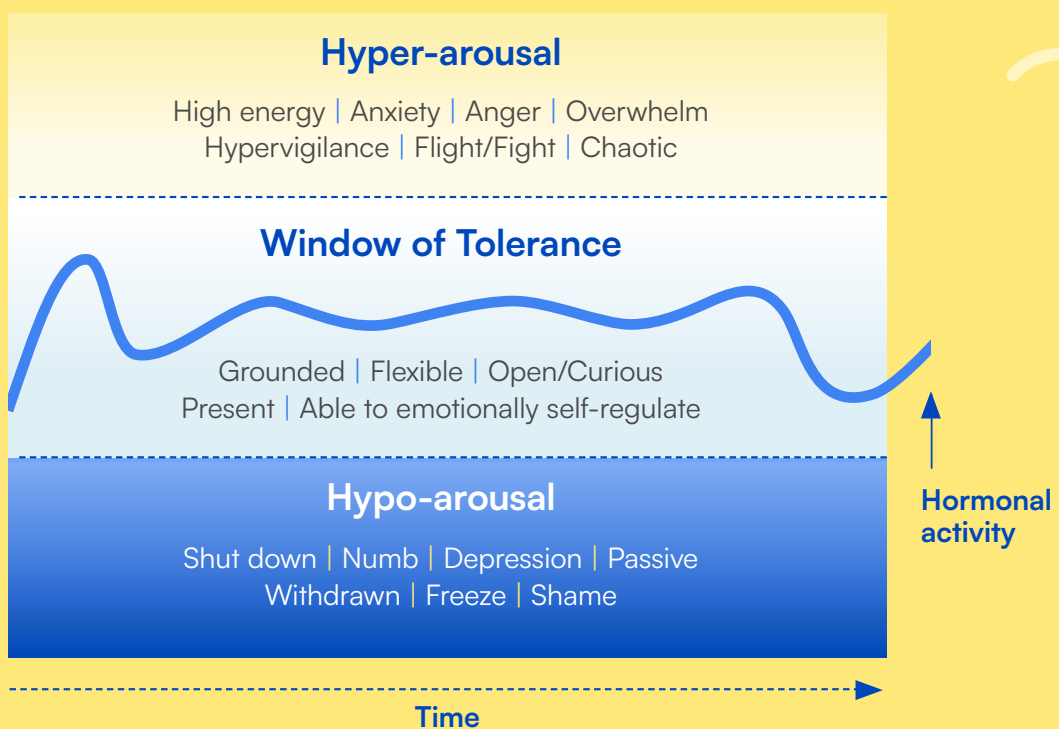
Window of Tolerance

The Window of Tolerance is a concept developed by Dr. Dan Siegel to describe the optimal zone for a person to function in everyday life.

When we are within our Window of Tolerance we are emotionally regulated and have the capacity to cope with everyday life. We can think clearly, stay focused, manage our emotions and make good choices. But when we are pushed outside of our window, we lose these skills, which can lead us to act or speak in ways that aren't helpful for us or our relationships. Internal and external challenges — such as those experienced in education settings - can push us out of our window, but knowing about this idea can help you better understand yourself and colleagues, reflect on your triggers and how best to support yourself and each other when it happens.



How the Window of Tolerance works:



You can help colleagues to stay within their Window of Tolerance by:

- sharing information about, or teaching them about, the Window of Tolerance by using our Window of Tolerance exercise for leaders below.
- sharing information about strategies that can help them stay within, or expand, their Window of Tolerance. Take a look at our website for useful tips, such as [how to complete your stress cycle](#).
- sharing posters in staffrooms or classrooms as useful prompts or reminders.

Window of Tolerance

Leaders, try this exercise with your team:

Part one:

Ask for 1 or 2 descriptive words from each person in the group on how they are doing today i.e. tired, nervous, inspired, scattered. To break the ice, it can help if you begin by sharing two descriptive words about your own experience in that moment. Then proceed around the group (if in-person) or ask them to write a descriptive word or two in the chat box (if meeting virtually).

Part two:

Display the Window of Tolerance graphic and briefly explain the concept. Acknowledge that some may be familiar with it, while others might be hearing it for the first time. Highlight that, just like today, we all experience different levels on the Window of Tolerance based on our daily, weekly and life experiences. Stressors, big or small, can push us out of our window, leading to hyperarousal or hypoarousal.

Part three:

Ask the group to discuss the Window of Tolerance in pairs. You can give them these questions below as prompts. After a few minutes ask one person from each pair to share their insights.

- Why might acknowledging your own experiences in this way be useful during times of stress or overwhelm?
- Can using this tool help build compassion among colleagues?
- How might it help create more resilience in your education setting?



Sources:

Learn more about the Window of Tolerance:

[Window of Tolerance, what is it, Education Scotland](#)

[Window of Tolerance, Professor Dan Siegel, UCLA School of Medicine, 1999](#)

3 Prioritise reflective practice

Reflective practice is essential for sustainable leadership. One proven form is professional supervision; a structured, confidential space to explore your purpose, challenges and wellbeing. Many school leaders describe this as a lifeline, particularly in combating isolation and stress.



What Professional Supervision is (and isn't!)

What it is

Reflective

Gives you space to discuss who you are, how you are, and what's going on for you at work.

About your professional identity

Focuses on your role within education and your connection to your purpose.

About your work as a leader

Looks at concerns about culture, team dynamics, staff members, students or yourself.

For roles with high emotional content

Helps you to acknowledge and digest specific issues, relationships and personal impact.

What it isn't

Therapy

Supervision is not about relationships with ourselves and our loved ones. It's about reflecting on your core purpose in the sector.

Counselling

It's not about your personal life, supervision focuses on what's going on for you at work.

Coaching

Coaching is goal orientated. The value of supervision is in the exploration rather than the destination.

Line management

Supervision is not about the day to day work of an individual employee or team. It provides a safe and confidential space to reflect on your work in education.

Try our free [e-learning module](#) on reflective conversations and register for [fully-funded professional supervision](#) for leaders and managers in England and Wales.

4 Embrace vulnerability as a leadership strength

In the past, vulnerability was often mistaken for weakness. Today, it's increasingly recognised as one of the most powerful traits a leader can embody. Academic researcher Brené Brown teaches that vulnerability is actually the clearest measure of courage because it reflects your willingness to face uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure.

Brown also explains that as humans, our deepest fear is shame and the worry that we'll be rejected or disconnected from others. She says that this fear can prevent us from being vulnerable. Yet, it's vulnerability that builds deeper connection and trust, especially in teams.

How vulnerability strengthens teams

1

Creates Psychological Safety

Teams can feel safer, more included and more resilient when vulnerability is acknowledged and welcomed.

2

Builds trust and belonging

When leaders model authenticity and courage, they give others permission to do the same. This fosters a sense of belonging and reduces the fear of judgment.

3

Encourages open communication

Vulnerability can lead to less defensiveness. Difficult conversations may become easier, as team members are more willing to share concerns and offer honest feedback.

1

Enables better problem solving

Teams can tackle issues more quickly and effectively when people aren't hiding mistakes or afraid to admit they don't know something. Vulnerability can speed up clarity and collaboration.

2

Boosts collaboration and innovation

When asking for help is normalised, collaboration can become easier and ideas might flow more freely. Vulnerability can foster creative thinking and a "we're in this together" mindset.

3

Reduces stress and increases support

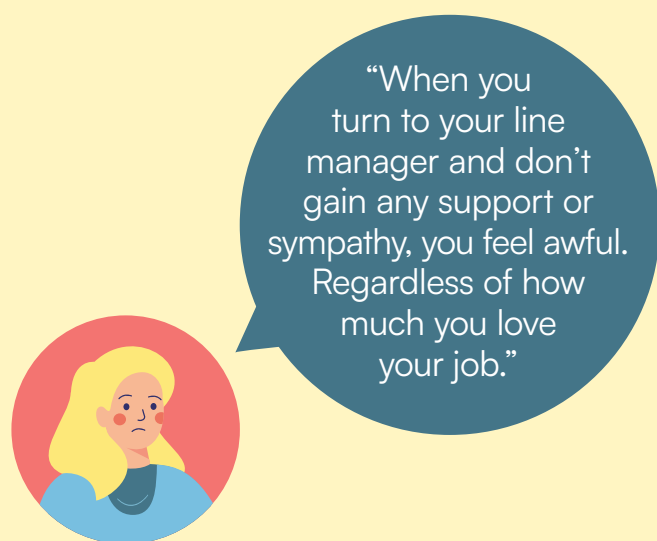
When people feel safe to express struggles or emotions, stress decreases and empathy increases. This deepens team connection and builds loyalty over time.

Find out how to start taking small steps to embracing vulnerability as a school leader in [The power of vulnerability in school leadership](#).

5 Role-model behaviour that prioritises wellbeing

When you set a healthy example by taking care of yourself, it can inspire your team to do the same. This setting of healthy examples is known as 'role-modelling' wellbeing behaviour. It will look different for every leader. Take a look at these practical tips for ways you can role-model wellbeing behaviour in [Role-modelling wellbeing as a busy leader](#). It can also help to remember that being open about your own challenges and asking for help is a beneficial quality for a leader. It helps build trust and motivates your team. When a leader talks about their own experiences with wellbeing and times they sought help, it can encourage team members to share their struggles too.

Section 2: Cultures that care



The role of a supportive leader and a caring culture in emotionally demanding environments cannot be underestimated. Below we share more evidence-based strategies which can help you to support your teams as they navigate the complexities of supporting a range of pupils in the classroom.

Building cultures that care is about shaping environments where everyone feels seen, valued and supported. And while leaders set the tone, all staff play a role in the culture of a school.

1 Build trust with neuroscience

For trust to be present, it’s vital for leaders to make time for connection and to show compassion. When trust is present, our brains release oxytocin and endorphins. These are chemicals that reduce stress and increase cooperation. In contrast, low-trust environments activate our stress response, which can lead to anxiety, defensiveness and burnout.



Trust is built when leaders:

- Show genuine compassion: doing a return to work interview? Don’t just make it a tick-box exercise. Ask how they are. Show you care.
- Make time to connect: make space for micro moments of connection — a quick check-in before the team meeting, friendly words exchanged in the staff room. It all adds up and helps staff feel valued.
- Listen actively: try using the [BUILD framework](#) to improve active listening.
- Respond without judgment: Do staff feel safe to speak up? Use our free [psychological safety audit](#) to assess the culture you’re fostering by answering the questions below with your team.

2 Create meaningful connections and relationships

Brene Brown's research around connection shows how it gives our lives purpose and meaning. She suggests school leaders focus on three key elements to create workplaces rooted in trust, empathy and connection, which she says all help foster resilience:

Meaningful connections and relationships



Grounded confidence:

is about showing your authentic self, embracing vulnerability and being part of a culture where staff grow and learn together.



The courage to walk alongside:

means not pushing from behind or leading from the front, but walking side by side with your colleagues.



Practising story stewardship:

involves being curious and recognising the impact of different life experiences; making colleagues feel heard and believing them when they tell you what an experience meant to them.

One of the first pillars of resilience we can let slip when we feel overwhelmed at work is our relationships. Encouraging staff to build positive working relationships — and to lean on those relationships when times are tough — can act as a major source of strength. Strong relationships within a team can also help to develop a sense of belonging and emotional safety, which are vital for overall wellbeing.

Read our tips for improved relationships, barriers to connection and how to overcome them in [Building Collegiate Relationships in schools](#) or watch our [expert webinar](#) about how to build positive relationships at work.

3 Know your team drivers

Drivers are powerful unconscious internal motivators which we learnt from our parents and other significant adults, while growing up. Whatever gained their approval or disapproval became ingrained in our behaviour patterns. However, our drivers can continue to invisibly dictate our adult behaviours, particularly in response to pressure and challenge, by keeping us stuck acting in ways that might be detrimental to our health and wellbeing.

To reveal your team's drivers, you might each want to fill out this [five drivers questionnaire](#). Once you have all identified your drivers, you will find you become more aware of their day to day influence on your work-life. Sharing your results with each other can help give new insights into behaviours and create more compassion and understanding.

Leaders can find it helps them know how to get the best from their team. Use this graphic for **further Insight** on the challenges of different drivers and how best to tailor the support you can offer.

	 Be perfect	 Hurry up	 Please people	 Be strong	 Try hard
Strengths	Accuracy	Meet deadlines	Team player	Trusted member of team	Motivated
Challenges	Might be too hard on themselves	Giving enough space to planning	Might struggle with conflict	Can bottle things up	Might put too much pressure on themselves
Key learning	Good enough is good enough	Remember rest can be productive too	You can't please everyone, every time	Showing vulnerability doesn't mean you are weak	Remember to take breaks
How to support them	Agree boundaries	Encourage breaks	Make space to talk things through	Let them know it's okay to ask for support	Encourage breaks and rest



4 Reach out for support

Finally, please remember, if you or your team are struggling with any of the topics covered in this guide, we can help in a number of ways. Things might be difficult, but you're never alone:

- Download and share our [helpline poster](#) or call our free helpline, available 24/7 to support teachers and education staff across the UK: **08000 562 561**.
- If you'd like more practical advice to support yourself and your team in dealing with the emotional challenges of working in education, our [Employee Assistance Programme](#), designed specifically for education staff, can help.
- Register for funded [Professional Supervision](#) for school leaders and managers in England and Wales, at no cost to you or your school.
- Leaders in Wales: Sign up to the [Staff Wellbeing Service](#) at no cost to your school, which includes our funded [Culture Development Service](#) and [Wellbeing Advisory Service](#).

5 Share our free resources with your team

- [Supporting SEND success: staff wellbeing webinar](#)
- [Partnering with parents: five strategies for stronger school communities](#)
- [Circle of control, influence and concern](#)
- [Beyond the mainstream: staff wellbeing in alternative provision webinar](#)
- [Setting boundaries: a guide for staff in schools](#)
- [Technology and teaching: top tips for boundary setting](#)
- [Managing disagreements at work: a guide for teachers and education staff](#)
- [Emotional support helpline poster](#)



Sources:

1. Brown, B. (2012). *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead*.
2. Brown, B., 2018. *Dare to Lead: Brave Work. Tough Conversations. Whole Hearts*.
3. Kline, N. (1999). *Time to Think: Listening to Ignite the Human Mind*.
4. Teacher Wellbeing Index, Education Support, 2025
5. [Education Scotland, Window of Tolerance](#)
6. <https://headheartbrain.com/brain-savvy-hr/the-neuroscience-of-trust/>
7. <https://neu.org.uk/latest/press-releases/state-education-send>