

Collective Care (Or, How the Hell Are We Going to Get Through This Year?)

by Daisy L. Breneman

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Be careful if you ask me how I'm doing right now—I will probably be honest. The past year and a half has been challenging and, by the end of the last academic year, we were, collectively, [struggling](#). So many of us are still not okay, and the pandemic is still here, but we're witnessing the vanishing of a lot of the flexibility, kindness, compassion, and care that was created as a response to the pandemic. There is a rush to “get back to normal,” [a normal that no longer exists](#). Often it seems that we are not, collectively, learning lessons from the pandemic. Given how much has been sacrificed—how much we've lost as a JMU community and as a global community—we have the responsibility [to carry these lessons forward](#).

One lesson that keeps emerging is the ongoing, urgent need to practice care, for ourselves and for each other. Disability Studies and [Mad Pride](#) scholar [Margaret Price](#) highlights not only the importance of collective care, but our shared, [collective accountability for care](#). That is, we are all responsible to and for others, including for ensuring that the needs of others are met. We must work together to create a [“culture of care.”](#)

As we continue to face the uncertainties (and struggle and grief and fear) of the seemingly endless pandemic, care must be a priority. Right now people are experiencing challenging times together—though, of course, marginalized groups are [disproportionately impacted](#) and may have less access to the kinds of resources needed to weather these relentless storms. But, in any given time, in any given space—say, a classroom—people will always be experiencing challenges in their lives that mean they will need additional resources and support to fully participate.

It's our responsibility as educators to create the kinds of flexible, adaptable, and caring spaces that will allow everyone to thrive and bring their full selves to the process. JMU and the CFI provide numerous resources on [teaching with justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion at the center](#), and care factors into many of them, including the CFI's weekly [Contemplative Practices for Pandemic Self-Care](#).

The [pedagogy of care](#) is not new—we mentioned it in a lot of [Toolboxes](#) last year—but the ongoing crises of now make it more urgent than ever that we infuse care into our work. Some might (understandably) object that “it's not our job” to do care work. I get it—we're already overloaded, and we are tired. We can't take care of students without [attending to our own needs](#). And, of course, some care needs fall outside our areas of expertise or outside what faculty can and should do. (This is where [appropriate referrals](#), such as [to the Counseling Center](#) or to [the Office of Disability Services](#), are especially important). But we can't do our jobs without considering care; our students cannot fully engage in the learning process when they are in distress, when there are barriers, and when their needs are not at least being acknowledged. We

can, and must, work to address [the ongoing trauma](#) of the past year and a half, for all of us, and work toward a [pedagogy of healing](#).

Price emphasizes that when people say they need something, believe them. Recognize and honor what it took for them to ask; thank them; and do the work to adjust and adapt the space to meet those needs. And there are concrete [things we can do](#) to create proactive access to address needs that might arise and to create cultures of care in our classrooms. Some specific ideas for [teaching that centers care](#) include the following:

- Include care and care resources, such as links to the Counseling Center or [resources for self-care](#), in your syllabus, as a page on Canvas, and in other communications. My CFI colleague Emily Gravett, for example, includes an optional module in Canvas on mindfulness, with links to guided meditations (like [this three-minute body scan](#)) and other resources. I find myself ending a lot of classes and Canvas announcements with this reminder: “please prioritize taking care of yourself and others.”
- Address care regularly and frequently, such as urging students to “do what you need to do to take care of yourself in this space” during class meetings (especially ones with potentially [sensitive content](#)).
- Build in time and space for care, including [bio breaks](#), moments of silence, and opportunities to reflect, which are also important [accessibility features](#). We all need time, support, and space to tend to our needs; these are especially essential for the [neurodiverse](#) and others who navigate [learning environments not designed for or by them](#). “Crip time” can be a meaningful way to rethink our relationships to time as we build more inclusive, equitable, and caring learning spaces.
- Use [universal design](#) practices to allow for options and flexibility, to meet a variety of needs and build [equitable learning environments](#).
- Consider giving students “care homework”: engage in a [contemplative practice](#); do one nice thing for yourself; do [one nice thing for someone else](#) (and then do that homework yourself!).
- Care your curriculum. A range of [scholarship of care](#), across a range of disciplines, might enrich or expand what your students are already learning.
- [Check in with students](#) regularly, and participate in the activity yourself. Allow students to help you generate check-in prompts. One of my favorites this past year was from a student whose prompt was “what food best represents how you feel today?” (That generated some awesome responses—I think mine that day was [vegetable soup](#).) This helps develop a community of care, reminding students that they are important and that they can be honest and vulnerable.

Finally, be kind to yourself, too. This is a (long) journey, and sometimes, especially in times as chaotic and exhausting as these, we’re not going to be our best to ourselves or others. Give yourself and others grace. Self-care is a [radical act](#). But we need environments that foster and empower self-care, and acknowledge our connectedness and our obligation to care for and with others. We need [collective care](#).

It’s hard to think about the upcoming academic year, with so many variables and uncertainties. I’m not the only one who anticipates a [tough year ahead](#). So many of us haven’t even had the chance to think about [pandemic recovery](#) because we’re still just trying to get through it. We need to care for ourselves and others, whether or not we think we have the capacity. In some of my worst moments over the past year and a half, just knowing someone was there for me

mattered—as did gestures such as a quick text, an email check-in, a funny gift, a walk together. Whether I took it up or not, the offer to help was itself what helped. We often don't fully know how much just our [presence](#) (even our frazzled or fractured presence) means to others, including students, colleagues, friends, loved ones, and [even people we don't know](#).

So, somehow, we are gonna get through this year. Let's commit to helping each other through it, and maybe even thriving during it—holding on to [hope](#), [gratitude](#), [love](#), and [joy](#). As Mary Oliver reminds us, "[Joy is not made to be a crumb](#)."

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