

Dear Tired Teacher

Brooke Johnson

Dear Tired Teacher,

I see you. I see you taking another minute to unjam the copier in the teacher's lounge one more time before it spits out the day's work. I see your smile welcoming each student into your classroom every hour, every day. I see the seemingly organized chaos with objectives and essential questions on the board. I see you giving advice to the college intern standing by your side from the moment they arrive to the moment they leave. I see you at lunch with students eating in your room, met with the laughter of friends who join them.

I see you after school hurriedly helping a student, a colleague, or honestly, just taking a second to stop at the restroom. I see you rushing to those leadership meetings. I see you walking to your car but first detouring to the gym to support your students from afar. By the time you leave, the sun has set and you drive, once again, in the dark of the day.

Tired teacher, maybe you're outwardly tired from the tailspin of your first-year teaching. Lord knows it's hard. Maybe you're secretly tired because you have years of experience and are equipped with skills to run the building. Lord knows you'll end up doing more than your fair share. Maybe you're mind numbingly tired from wondering if it's all worth it. Are you making any difference in that little overstuffed 80-degree classroom brimming with bodies breathing too much hot air, adding to the heat index you desperately wish to escape? Lord knows not a soul can work effectively in that sauna.

I see you. Can I stop you for just one second? Listen closely. "Please, take care of yourself!" Let those words sink in and linger on your own lips.

I know it's not going to click for you right now. No, you will keep pushing forward, shouldering too much responsibility, too much emotional burden, too much perfection planned on paper, too much overthinking about convincing your colleagues to keep trying new things, and too little space for yourself.

It's ok. I can see the tired weariness straining behind those eyes and that smile as you respond, "No really, I'm fine. I've got this." We both know you don't.

You will break. The last hour. The last day. Right before Thanksgiving Break. You will break. This break will be the undoing of all the little cracks forming over the last several months. This break will leave you panicked and in tears staring at your desk while students crowd around. They know something is wrong. They hear it in your labored breathing and see it in your vacant eyes. Saved by the final bell, you're left in an empty room but your panicked breathing still haunts you. The tears will keep streaming on and off for days. The doctor will speak the words "situational depression and anxiety" as your mind tries to wrap your head around the diagnosis.

I see you. Suddenly, you see you too.

You see your fragile state staring back in the mirror. You hear your own voice softer, weaker as you force yourself to speak to students, colleagues, and staff. You grow silent all together because

speaking requires energy you no longer possess. You taste the salty tears at the end of the day brought on by exhaustion coursing through your body and brain. You feel the need to curl up under a blanket on the couch and stay there until morning. Then you bring your fragile tired self to do it all over again.

Can I stop you now, dear tired teacher? You seem to have a few extra seconds, seeing as how you're too weary to pack up. As you sit and muster the energy to leave for the day let me just take a second to gently remind you, "Please, take care of yourself."

In this moment, you listen. It clicks. These words offer hope. You respond with a simple nod. You take your things and go. You walk out that door and make some time for yourself.

You ask for help from people you never thought you'd need. You begin the process of untangling all those wound-up expectations you never actually had to meet. As part of the process you take time to sit and list precisely who you are. Teacher...the clock ticks on...until you remember you are more than a teacher. A friend, foodie, reader, writer, sports enthusiast, and lover of naps! Yeah, you are more than a teacher. You keep this list tucked inside a safe space as a reminder. You are more whole and complex than you believed.

Then there's the sticky notes scribbled with permission slips. You've formed the habit of prescribing permission to do certain things. When you see a sticky note stuck to your desk you crack a smile: *You have permission to laugh today.* You then find yesterday's permission slip crumpled in your jeans pocket: *You have permission to be present and not perfect.* Which is good because you're presently wearing yesterday's jeans because that's just how life goes. You crack another smile at this thought and there you go laughing again. You're finding the freedom in permission to do what you never did before. You have grace for yourself.

This, my dear tired teacher, is the beginning of a new you. A new rhythm. A new way of teaching. A new way of living. You will never be wholly the same again. I can confidently say you will come out on the other side stronger and freer. A newfound bravery to try new things, both big and small, will wiggle its way into your classroom and your life. A liberating ability to embrace imperfection will slowly bring light back to your eyes, igniting a fire in your students. The courage to laugh again will return, becoming the soundtrack of your classroom.

This, my dear tired teacher, is what taking care of yourself looks like. You are more than a teacher. You are an honest mirror, giving hope to each student and colleague straining to relinquish their all too tired perfection. Let them see your flaws and hear your story. Set the pace for them to live again both in and out of those four walls of their classroom.

Sincerely,
A Recovering Tired Teacher

Author Biography

Brooke Johnson was born and raised in Wichita, KS. She loves the wide-open spaces but continually feels the need to travel abroad. After graduating from WSU in 2008, she taught English language arts at Wichita North High School for nine years. Six of those years she worked with the AVID system, encouraging students to seize every opportunity they could for their future. Currently,

Brooke teaches ESOL English language arts at Wichita East High School. Recently she received her MLA degree from Baker University with an emphasis in literature. Brooke is also a National Staff Developer for AVID, where she trains other content teachers in AVID reading strategies that can help increase rigor and comprehension in the classroom for all students. Brooke was the 2015 Summer Teacher Speaker at the Dallas AVID Summer institute. She enjoys sharing her stories and lessons learned in the classroom. She can be reached at bjohnson8@usd259.net.



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