Transformational Tools for Special Educators

This book is dedicated to the extraordinary professionals in special education whose commitment, resilience, and heart transform lives in countless ways.

And to my husband, Charles, whose steadfast support sustained me through every chapter of this work.

Transformational Tools for Special Educators

How to Beat Burnout and Become the Best at What You Do

Katrina G. Huels

CORWIN

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Foreword

Steve McMahon

Over thirty years ago, I walked into my first special education classroom with a teaching degree, good intentions, and no understanding of what I was about to face. I had no idea I was entering a profession that would demand every ounce of my emotional intelligence, resilience, and capacity for human connection.

This book is a timely and essential resource for a profession in crisis. Special education teachers are among the most highly stressed professionals in our society, and burnout isn't just a buzzword. It is a devastating reality driving talented educators out of the field at alarming rates. The problem isn't a lack of dedication from our teachers. It's that we've failed to equip them with the emotional intelligence skills essential for thriving in these high-stress, high-stakes environments.

Over the years, I've worn many hats: special education teacher, program specialist, behavior intervention consultant, and now CEO of MindSet Safety Management. Each role has deepened my understanding of a fundamental truth: The most critical skills we need in special education aren't found in any teaching manual. They're the skills of emotional regulation, crisis de-escalation, and maintaining our humanity under extreme pressure.

As a teacher, I learned that student behavior is communication—but I wasn't prepared for how that communication would trigger my own stress responses. Moving into program specialist and behavior intervention roles, I began to see patterns: The most effective educators weren't necessarily those with the most training: They were those who could stay calm in chaos, read the emotional climate of a room, and respond thoughtfully rather than reactively.

This is where Katrina Huels's work becomes invaluable. With a strong background in psychology and over twenty-two years of experience in special education, Katrina has identified the missing piece in professional development for special educators. The tools she presents in this book represent exactly what we've needed: evidence-based strategies for developing the emotional infrastructure that makes excellence sustainable in our field. More importantly, these are the critical skills necessary for personal wellness that will improve overall school culture and teacher retention.

Special education is a series of cascading challenges requiring real-time decision-making under emotional stress. What makes this book different from typical wellness advice is that it doesn't offer platitudes about self-care or generic stress management tips. Instead, it treats emotional intelligence as professional development—sophisticated skills that can be learned, practiced, and mastered. The neuroplasticity research underlying these tools means that with practice, staying calm under pressure can become as automatic as any other professional skill.

What I appreciate most about this approach is its foundation in a growth model. Just as we wouldn't expect a student to master reading without consistent practice, we can't expect ourselves to develop emotional intelligence skills without deliberate, ongoing application. This book doesn't offer quick fixes or one-size-fits-all solutions. Instead, it provides a systematic framework for building competencies that grow stronger with repetition.

The beauty of this growth model is that it mirrors what we know works with our students. We start with basic skills, practice them until they become automatic, then build upon that foundation. Each chapter provides not just the theory but also the practical techniques that must be rehearsed, refined, and integrated into daily practice. Whether it's learning to use breathwork in the moment of crisis or developing empathy through perspective-taking exercises, these skills become more natural and effective the more we use them.

This practice-based approach acknowledges that emotional intelligence isn't something we either have or don't have. It is a set of learnable skills that improve with intentional effort. The real-world scenarios and step-by-step techniques provide the structured practice opportunities we need to develop these capacities. These tools can be applied throughout all roles in our society, but they're especially crucial for those of us working on the front lines of education.

To every educator, administrator, paraprofessional, and support staff working in schools today: You are on the front lines of one of society's most important missions. The work you do matters, and you deserve tools that match the significance of your calling.

This book should be in the hands of every person working in education—not as another requirement to add to your workload but as the professional development you've been waiting for. The emotional intelligence skills Katrina presents here aren't just beneficial; they're essential for creating the kind of educational environment where both staff and students can thrive. In a profession where burnout threatens our most dedicated professionals, this book offers a path toward sustainable excellence built on skill rather than willpower alone.

Steve McMahon
CEO, MindSet Safety Management and
author of *Transformative Crisis Management*

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About the Author

Katrina G. Huels is an educational consultant who has more than twenty years of experience in special education, with expertise spanning instructional design, program leadership, and national accreditation. She has served in roles ranging from classroom teacher to senior executive, and her robust background in psychology and education informs a career grounded in evidence-based practice and systemic reform. Throughout her career, Katrina experienced firsthand both the profound rewards and the ongoing stress and fatigue that lead to burnout among educators. As she sought strategies to build internal balance, resilience, and motivation in herself and her staff members, she encountered a persistent gap in resources and a lack of systemic solutions.

Drawing on the framework of emotional intelligence and the science of neuroplasticity, Katrina translates research into actionable tools tailored to high-stakes environments. This work reflects her conviction that all educators deserve strategies that allow them to thrive in their roles throughout their careers. You can find more information and contact Katrina at https://www.huelsappliedharmony.com.

Introduction

I have been privileged to work alongside special educators in a variety of roles, from classroom teacher to executive leadership. Most of us enter special education from a place of purpose, driven by a belief in every student's potential and a desire to make a positive difference. But the daily realities of the work can take a toll in unexpected ways.

When special educators lose passion for their work or leave the field entirely, it is rarely because they stopped caring about students. The problem is that so few are equipped with the tools needed to care for themselves in the same way they care for others. Without clear strategies to navigate the ongoing stress and demands inherent to the field, professionals often find themselves counting down the days until the next calendar break, wondering how much longer they can endure the strain.

Throughout each school year, special educators receive extensive training on legal compliance, specialized instruction, and behavior management. Yet, where is the professional learning that supports the professionals? When considering your own experience, how many training sessions have addressed stress reduction and burnout prevention? Very few options like this exist, and when they do appear, they rarely meet the emotional and cognitive demands of the special educator's role. This gap in professional development is not just unfortunate. It is unsustainable, and it feeds directly into the burnout crisis that is pushing special educators out of the field. This is not just a systemic problem. It is deeply personal.

THE CHALLENGE

The challenges in special education are formidable, regardless of your role. It may be the mounting paperwork and extensive data collection, the behavioral crises, the complex IEP meetings that become adversarial, the budget constraints that leave programs under-resourced, or the constant juggling of multiple priorities and stakeholder needs. Whether you are managing a caseload, leading a team, overseeing compliance, or supporting families through difficult decisions, the relentless demands can feel overwhelming.

You are not alone. Nearly half of all K-12 teachers report feeling burned out often or always, with special educators facing particularly high rates of stress and turnover. Simply enduring the strain and hoping for relief is not a solution. There is an urgent need to develop the emotional and psychological skills currently omitted from our professional preparation. Special education professionals require resources and professional development that move beyond best practices and creative classroom interventions. They need practical tools to create internal and external environments where they can excel and thrive throughout their careers.

THE SOLUTION

Transformational Tools for Special Educators is a practical, research-informed toolkit designed to help special education professionals mitigate stress, without adding to an already overwhelming workload.

The tools in this book are not theoretical concepts or generic wellness advice. Research-based tools are presented here within the context of each emotional intelligence domain (self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, social skills) and paired with real-world scenarios in special education settings. This approach provides a deep understanding of the tools in contexts that reflect your daily experience. The content emphasizes underlying neurological mechanisms and the research behind each tool, so that you understand *how* the tools work and *why* they work. You will gain perspective on why consistent application reshapes the brain in ways that support you regardless of the challenges you encounter. This work is not about managing stress in the moment. It is about training your nervous system to respond differently over time.

THE IMPACT

As you strengthen your emotional intelligence, you become a steadying force in your school community. Your regulated nervous system helps co-regulate others. Your students feel safer and more supported. Your colleagues experience you as a reliable source of guidance and professionalism. Families trust you more readily. The ripple effects of your neurological transformation create positive change throughout your entire professional ecosystem.

When districts integrate this work into professional development curricula, they can expect greater staff retention, more responsive leadership, productive teams, improved student outcomes, and a supportive school culture that fosters long-term engagement and satisfaction.

WHO WILL BENEFIT FROM THIS WORK

Whether you are a first-year teacher feeling overwhelmed by the complexity of your role, a veteran educator experiencing chronic fatigue, a related service provider or social worker juggling multiple schools, or an administrator seeking to support your team more effectively, this resource meets you where you are. The content here is particularly relevant for special education teachers, paraeducators, and a wide range of specialists, including social workers, speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, adaptive coaches, and behavior specialists. School and district administrators will also find valuable tools and insights to support themselves and their teams here.

HOW TO APPROACH THIS WORK

Transformational Tools is designed to be used individually or at the school, district, or state levels.

If used individually, you can read the book in its entirety, or you can choose to focus on the areas where you need the most support right now, whether that's staying calm under pressure, maintaining motivation when progress feels slow, or building stronger relationships with the families and colleagues you serve. There is no need to master everything at once. Just start using the tools and trust in your brain's remarkable capacity for change, and when you do, you will realize that most of the tools provided here can be implemented in just three to ten minutes and integrate seamlessly into your existing routines.

If implemented at the school or district level through professional learning, a training curriculum and consultative support are available, or you can use the book on its own to guide professional development or professional learning community studies.

Chapter 3 provides a full guide to the book's structure and suggestions for how to begin. You will also find a breakdown of how each tool is presented, including practical techniques, real-world scenarios, and key neurological insights to support long-term application.

Whether you start at the beginning or jump to a section aligned with your current challenges, the tools are flexible enough to support you now and in the future.

The remarkable individuals who serve exceptional students deserve a practical, science-backed guide that offers lasting support throughout their professional journey. This book delivers that resource.

PART 1

Setting the Stage: The Crisis, the Science, and the Framework

CHAPTER 1

The Burnout Crisis

I used to wake up excited to make a difference. Now, I wake up exhausted, wondering how much longer I can do this.

J. Tobert, Special Education Supervisor

Chronic fatigue, one of the many precursors to burnout, lies at the root of Mr. Tobert's sentiments. His thoughts and feelings are shared by educators nationwide, and this type of exhaustion undermines motivation and erodes the hope of sustaining a fulfilling career in special education.

Burnout is a state of chronic physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion that results from prolonged exposure to unrelenting stress.[1] In special education, it often emerges when professionals are expected to meet multiple demands without the resources, support, or time to do so effectively. Burnout is cumulative, often beginning with subtle signs like emotional depletion or a sense of detachment. If left unaddressed, this can lead to a profound loss of motivation, diminished professional efficacy, and a sense of disconnection from one's work and purpose. When burnout takes hold, it affects a person's cognition, mood, and even physical health.

Special education professionals understand the profound impact of their work. Most would agree that the rewards of the profession are vast and undeniable, but so are the challenges. Balancing diverse student needs with mounting responsibilities and limited resources is taking a toll.

It is important to understand that the impact of burnout is not confined to the individual experiencing it, especially in the workplace. When a person begins to struggle with feelings of overwhelm and fatigue, performance naturally declines. Emails may go unanswered. Collaboration with colleagues becomes inconsistent. Communication with families is delayed or reduced. Sick days increase. Paperwork piles up. Gradually, essential responsibilities fall behind, and the burden shifts to others. This redistribution of tasks creates a cascading effect that adds pressure to colleagues who

already manage full workloads. When half of a special education team shows signs of burnout, the entire system risks destabilization, and the ability to function as a coordinated team breaks down.

These patterns are not isolated or rare. They appear in schools and districts across the country, pointing to an issue that is reshaping the profession itself. Burnout is widespread, measurable, and accelerating. To find effective solutions, understanding the full scope and impact of the burnout crisis is essential.

SCOPE AND IMPACT

Burnout among educators is reaching critical levels. Chronic stress, emotional depletion, and unsustainable workloads are pushing professionals to their limits. Psychologist Herbert Freudenberger first defined burnout in 1974 as emotional exhaustion in caregiving professions,[2] and it remains one of the greatest challenges in education.

Recent statistics further underscore the scope of the problem:

- In 2024, nearly 44 percent of K–12 teachers in the United States reported feeling burned out often or always.[3]
- Gallup research identified K–12 teachers as the most burned-out professionals, with 52 percent reporting extreme stress, higher than in any other profession.[4]
- Educators early in their careers are particularly vulnerable; up to 50 percent leave the field within their first five years.[5]

The crisis is even more pronounced for special education teachers. Special education teacher turnover stands at 15 percent annually, with numbers continuing to rise.[6] In Pennsylvania, for example, special education departures increased from 17 percent in 2019–2020 to 22 percent in 2021–2022.[7] By the 2023–2024 school year, more than half of US school districts and 80 percent of states reported shortages of special education teachers.[8]

These statistics are not surprising and reflect daily realities. A special education teacher might spend the morning differentiating lessons for students with complex learning profiles, then shift to crisis intervention for a student in emotional distress, and finally attend a lengthy Individualized Education Program (IEP) meeting that includes family members, administrators, and attorneys. The relentless pace of these responsibilities, often performed with limited breaks or resources, gradually erodes balance and well-being.

Though the burnout crisis in special education is often associated with teachers, it impacts the entire network of professionals supporting students with special needs, as noted in Table 1.1.

TABLE 1.1 Burnout Factors for Special Education Professionals

PROFESSION TITLES	BURNOUT FACTORS
Speech-language pathologists	Typically manage caseloads of 50 to 60 students across multiple schools. They must balance a wide range of responsibilities, including direct therapy, paperwork compliance, and collaboration with educators and families. Working in multiple locations can sometimes lead to professional isolation and logistical challenges that further increase stress.[9]
Occupational therapists	Juggle a myriad of tasks, from designing and implementing individualized interventions, developing IEP goals, to collaborating with teachers and families. A survey of school-based occupational therapists in Colorado found that although most occupational therapists spend their workweek on direct services, a substantial portion of their time is tied up in evaluative, consultative, and documentation-related tasks, suggesting that rising demands reduce time available for direct therapy.[10] The increasing complexity and demands for school-based practitioners increase the risk for burnout.[11]
Paraeducators	Provide valuable classroom and one-on-one support for students who have significant behavioral or medical needs, often without adequate recognition, wages, or support.[12] There is limited research specific to rates of burnout for paraeducators, but the demands of this role coupled with feeling unappreciated and underpaid easily sets the stage for stress and fatigue that leads to burnout.
School counselors	Play a critical role in student well-being. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) recommends a ratio of one counselor per 250 students, but in reality, the national average is closer to one per 380 students, with some states exceeding 1 to 600.[13]
School social workers	Coordinate services for students experiencing poverty, homelessness, or significant mental health challenges. Their work involves not only supporting students but also advocating for families. Research highlights that school workers are experiencing burnout linked to unrealistic workloads, role conflict, and a lack of resources.[14]
Behavior analysts	Support students with significant behavioral concerns throughout their workday, often without adequate staffing support. A study found that over 70 percent of Board Certified Behavior Analysts reported experiencing burnout, with emotional exhaustion and depersonalization being the most commonly cited factors.[15]
School and district leaders	Navigate an educational landscape that includes staff shortages, compliance mandates, and increasing student needs. Many spend their days resolving crises, managing personnel, and shouldering the emotional weight of supporting both students and staff. A 2021 article report shared research findings found that 42 percent of school administrators had considered resigning because of working conditions, high-stakes accountability, lack of decision-making authority, and a lack of professional learning opportunities. stress, workload, and lack of support.[16]

Across the country, schools are losing qualified special education professionals faster than they can replace them.[17] Burnout contributes heavily to special education positions that remain vacant for months.[18] When left unaddressed, service delivery weakens, support teams fragment, and a cycle of staff turnover leaves students without the consistency they need.[19] The more burnout spreads, the more it reshapes the profession by attrition.

Burnout is not only drawing experienced special educators out of the field, it actively discourages others from entering it. College students preparing to enter the special education field are expressing growing concern about the stress, isolation, and unrealistic demands reported by current educators.[20]

While some level of stress is inherent to special education, especially as the number of students requiring intensive support continues to rise,[21] burnout is not an unavoidable outcome. What can change is how schools structure their systems, how leaders prioritize staff well-being, and how individual professionals approach their own sustainability in the field. Research-based methods and tools are available that can turn the tide on the burnout trend.

A PATH FORWARD

The challenges in special education are significant, but they do not have to define the profession. With the right tools and resources, professionals who serve students with special needs can reconnect with their sense of purpose, beat burnout, and achieve long-term success in their work.

By linking two key concepts in personal and professional development; that is, emotional intelligence and neuroplasticity, this guide offers a blueprint for building resilience, reducing stress, and enhancing emotional balance. The goal is not merely to *manage* existing challenges but to *transform* personal and professional practice so that special educators can thrive over the long term. In doing so, professionals create a positive ripple effect for students, colleagues, and school communities.

When special education professionals cultivate emotional intelligence, they develop a kind of internal scaffolding that allows them to navigate high-stress situations while remaining connected to their personal goals and values. A landmark longitudinal study by Brackett et al. (2010) found that educators with higher levels of emotional intelligence reported significantly lower levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, both key indicators of burnout. These educators were also more likely to experience job satisfaction and classroom effectiveness. Emotional regulation, in particular, emerged as a powerful buffer that helped educators maintain their well-being in high-pressure environments.[22]

The Prosocial Classroom framework, introduced by Jennings and Greenberg, confirms that teachers' social and emotional competence has far-reaching implications for school environments.[23] Their research shows

that emotionally intelligent educators are more likely to foster supportive relationships with students, manage classrooms effectively, and reduce behavioral disruptions. These conditions enhance academic engagement and promote a more positive classroom climate. In short, emotionally competent educators are less vulnerable to stress-related burnout, making them more consistent and effective in their roles.

Further evidence comes from the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, whose RULER program has been adopted by thousands of schools across the United States and internationally. RULER is an acronym for Recognizing, Understanding, Labeling, Expressing, and Regulating emotions. The acronym equips educators and students with the language and tools to navigate emotional experiences constructively. Studies evaluating RULER schools show improvements in teacher retention, classroom climate, and student academic performance, along with significant reductions in teacher burnout and emotional fatigue.[24] These results reinforce a growing consensus in the field: Integrating emotional intelligence into daily practice is not an aspirational ideal. It is an evidence-based path toward resilience, renewal, and meaningful change.

When schools or districts prioritize their staff members' well-being and intentionally incorporate emotional intelligence training into professional development opportunities, the result is healthier school cultures and deeper relationships, setting the stage for educational systems where both students and staff can flourish.

Research by Elias and colleagues underscores that when schools adopt a coordinated approach to social-emotional learning that includes the explicit cultivation of emotional intelligence in staff, there are marked improvements in staff collaboration, leadership responsiveness, and the overall emotional climate of the school.[25] These shifts in adult behavior contribute directly to stronger student-teacher relationships and more effective instructional teams. Similarly, a study by Schonert-Reichl highlights that when schools integrate emotional-intelligence training into their professional-development curriculum, significant gains are apparent in organizational functioning and educator well-being. Teachers report greater confidence in handling conflict, improved communication with administrators, and a stronger sense of collective efficacy.[26]

Benefits of Integrating Emotional Intelligence

Individual and Systemic Outcomes

- Reduces emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and burnout among special educators
- Improves job satisfaction and teacher retention

(Continued)

(Continued)

- Strengthens classroom management and reduces behavioral disruptions
- Enhances student-teacher relationships and classroom climate
- Increases academic engagement and student achievement
- Promotes collaboration, responsive leadership, and organizational well-being
- Builds educators' capacity to regulate emotions, handle conflict, and sustain resilience under pressure

Research clearly shows that the path forward is marked by tremendous possibility. Whether the tools in this book are used individually or systemically, once emotional intelligence becomes embedded in the daily practice of special educators, they are no longer left to rely on endurance alone. They gain access to tools that restore clarity, reconnect them to their purpose, and allow them to lead with compassion, even in the most complex settings.

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