

disease. Other positivity-oriented strategies include affirming personal values or writing down positive aspects of a stressor. Accepting more self-compassion can also help mitigate high stress levels over time.

### 3. FORWARD TO FLOURISHING

COVID-19 laid waste to principals' collective mental health and continues to do so, with issues significantly increasing across all ages, genders, and races. Of course, much of principals' stress existed prior to the pandemic, but the emotional ups and downs of designing new systems overnight took their toll.

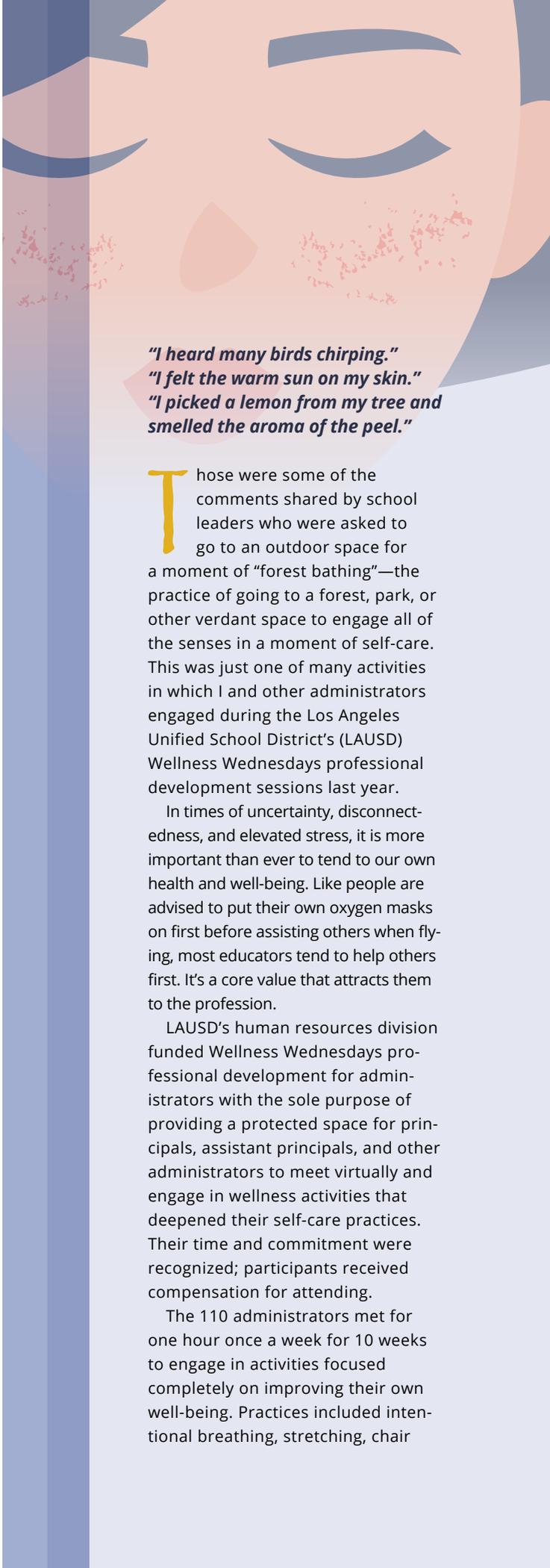
To move from languishing to flourishing, we recommend seizing this opportunity to evolve from knowing what you should do toward actually doing it. Adopting a daily SEL practice infused with positivity is an effective way to alleviate stress and avoid burnout to become an even better school leader. You can implement the following practices starting now:

- **Reflect on the positives daily.** It is a natural survival instinct to lean toward the negative. Intentionally fight that instinct and look for successes, no matter how big or small. There are small victories all around you.
- **Seek positive explanations for actions or events.** Practice perspective-taking and empathy to help illuminate the well-intentioned reasons that explain what's going on in your school.
- **Define and slow your triggers.** You know what sets you off; anticipate triggers and mitigate your reactions. For example, you might schedule more demanding meetings or tasks early in the day, when you're more emotionally capable of handling high-stress situations.
- **Breathe intentionally.** A few minutes of intentional deep breathing can help reestablish a calm state. Check out the book *Breath: The New Science of a Lost Art* by James Nestor for guidance.

Leaders who flourish perform at high levels individually and socially, and students, teachers, and families need principals to be their best, healthiest selves. To get there, start by putting your own oxygen mask on first. ●

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***"I heard many birds chirping."  
"I felt the warm sun on my skin."  
"I picked a lemon from my tree and  
smelled the aroma of the peel."***

Those were some of the comments shared by school leaders who were asked to go to an outdoor space for a moment of "forest bathing"—the practice of going to a forest, park, or other verdant space to engage all of the senses in a moment of self-care. This was just one of many activities in which I and other administrators engaged during the Los Angeles Unified School District's (LAUSD) Wellness Wednesdays professional development sessions last year.

In times of uncertainty, disconnect-ness, and elevated stress, it is more important than ever to tend to our own health and well-being. Like people are advised to put their own oxygen masks on first before assisting others when flying, most educators tend to help others first. It's a core value that attracts them to the profession.

LAUSD's human resources division funded Wellness Wednesdays professional development for administrators with the sole purpose of providing a protected space for principals, assistant principals, and other administrators to meet virtually and engage in wellness activities that deepened their self-care practices. Their time and commitment were recognized; participants received compensation for attending.

The 110 administrators met for one hour once a week for 10 weeks to engage in activities focused completely on improving their own well-being. Practices included intentional breathing, stretching, chair

# WORKING TOWARD WELLNESS

**L.A. administrators practice coping strategies to deal with pandemic-era school stresses**  
**BY MARCO A. NAVA**

yoga, art therapy, gratitude practice, and forest bathing, among others. In every session, we sprinkled in research about why such practices are beneficial. The following are snapshots of the experiences from participants.

## NEUROGRAPHIC ART

“The art therapy session took place during a very critical week for me, both personally and professionally,” says Evangelina Cantu, principal of San Antonio Elementary School in Huntington Park. “As I engaged in creating art during our session, I experienced its transformative power in shifting my own emotions.”

Neurographic art captures how the inner being reacts to the outer world in an effort to visually transform the fear and chaos of one’s challenges into something more calming, peaceful, and beautiful. Created in 2014 by Pavel Piskarev, a Russian psychologist, it takes participants into a meditative state that allows the brain to recharge and improves one’s ability to cope with challenges.

“Our leadership team decided to engage our staff in this same art therapy experience during a staff meeting where the planned agenda topic could potentially elicit negative emotions,” Cantu says. “We created the most beautiful communal art piece, which has come to symbolize our collectiveness through this whole journey.”

## FOREST BATHING

In the 1980s, Japan proposed a program called *shinrin-yoku*, or forest bathing, to help people living in densely populated urban areas reset and recharge. Put simply, a forest bath is the practice of connecting with nature.

Subsequent research showed that forest bathing boosts immunity, reduces stress, and improves cognitive function, perhaps due to the phytoncides trees produce to fight off infections and disease. Humans inhale these aerosolized antimicrobial substances and benefit from them when in nature.

LAUSD’s “Great Outdoors” Wellness Wednesday session invited administrators to step outside, take a deep breath, notice their senses, and enjoy a mindful moment in nature. For some, that meant stepping into their backyard or onto their porch, and for others, into the schoolyard. The more immersed in nature, the better, but you can take a forest bath anywhere there are trees.

Studies say that looking at forest scenery for 20 minutes reduces stress. One participant, principal supervisor José Rodriguez, says he plans to go forward with the work

by “incorporating and practicing the techniques with school leaders and discussing ways to integrate the techniques into their communities.”

## BREATHING AND STRETCHING

Aware of the correlation between stress and health problems, another session asked school leaders to engage in the practice of intentional breathing and stretching to mitigate tension. Offering techniques participants could use to enhance awareness of their physical reactions to stress, they were asked to close their eyes, turn off their cameras, and quiet their busy minds. This allowed them to pause and check in with their bodies to assess emotional levels.

Reflection through guided breathing and meditation helps achieve greater clarity and can help practitioners better process and manage challenges. Participants viewed a clip from NASA fellow Robert Alexander explaining how cultivating a sense of presence and connectedness through breathing can help people realign themselves to their purpose. For participating school leaders, it reinforced the necessity of ensuring personal well-being in order to be more effective and empathetic leaders.

“It was rejuvenating to participate in the Wellness Wednesday series,” says Adebimpe Oni, assistant principal at Dorsey High School in Los Angeles. “The work to reopen schools was all-consuming, since I am in charge of school operations. However, every session created the space to breathe and get support from the Wellness Wednesdays staff. That truly kept me going.”

On a pre-program survey, 67 percent of administrators reported “high” to “very high” levels of stress. After the Wellness Wednesday series, that number was down to just 18 percent. Participants made a commitment to continuing their self-care and well-being practices.

It takes a collaborative effort to foster an environment of well-being, but investing in the well-being of students, teachers, staff, and administrators pays off. An organization’s human resources are its most important assets, and building healthy, positive school climates improves outcomes for children and adults alike. Happy wellnessing! ●

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