

Overcoming Obstacles to an Open Heart

When our hearts are closed, we may feel constricted, alone, tight, defensive, inflexible, numb, irritable, or uncaring. Our breathing may be shallow, our chest tight, our attention narrow. Our hearts may be closed because of some difficulties at home or a difficult interaction with a colleague. Or perhaps we are simply exhausted from the speed and pace of life. Whatever the obstacle, once we have more awareness about the state of our heart, we can make more conscious choices. For example, if we have just had a difficult conversation with a colleague and notice our heart is closed, we may realize we need to remain extra attentive to a tendency to overreact to student behavior that would not otherwise trigger us.

Activities for Overcoming the Obstacles to an Open Heart

- This week, note when your heart is opened and when it is closed. Notice if there is a particular reason why your heart is opened or closed.
- Notice what tends to open your heart when it is closed.
- Try engaging daily for a week in an activity that opens your heart, and note the difference for you personally and for your students.
- Before class, think of one thing you appreciate about each of your students or about the class as a whole. This can be particularly helpful with students you have a hard time with.
- Consider sharing a compliment with each of your students about his or her work or behavior.
- Engage in some kind of activity at the end of the day that helps you let go of any heaviness or sense of burden as you intentionally make the shift from your professional to your personal life.
- Create a mindfulness exercise that supports you to work with triggers and open your heart again (e.g. three deep breaths, noticing five things in the room, stepping outside).
- Ask for help from colleagues, family, and friends.

Inquiring into the state of our heart can help us identify our own personal obstacles to caring so that we can recognize what kinds of support and resources we need to employ to open our heart again. For example, if we feel our perspective is consistently not valued in a school setting, we may need to set up a personal meeting with the principal or find a colleague who is supportive. If we have a student whose behavior or attitude triggers us to close our heart, we may need to find a way to create a different kind of relationship with that student, shift our own attitude, or set up a one-on-one meeting with that student to find out what is beneath the behavior. If our heart is closing because we feel constantly overwhelmed, we may need to practice saying no to requests or commitments or to carve out more space and time for rest and rejuvenation.

Note: You can read more about this in [*The Five Dimensions of Engaged Teaching: A Practical Guide for Educators*](#) by Laura Weaver and Mark Wilding (Solution Tree 2013)