

# How to engage students in 2021

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**While some schools are closed, students have faced new challenges.** These include difficulty self-regulating, adapting to a confined life where families are living on top of each other, the lack of proper mental breaks, not to mention the impact of the media endlessly listing the number of deaths and the disastrous economic and social consequences of the pandemic... All these factors have had a huge toll not just on their general well-being, but also on their ability to project, plan and thus be self-motivated.



In such a difficult context, how might teachers try to cater for their students' needs? What strategies can we implement to inspire a willingness to learn in a year that has already had a difficult start?

A switch is surely needed in both pastoral and academic programmes. Well-being, mindfulness, positivity, reflection, development of new skills and resilience need to be prioritised. A 'back-to-basics' approach on the aims of education is needed.

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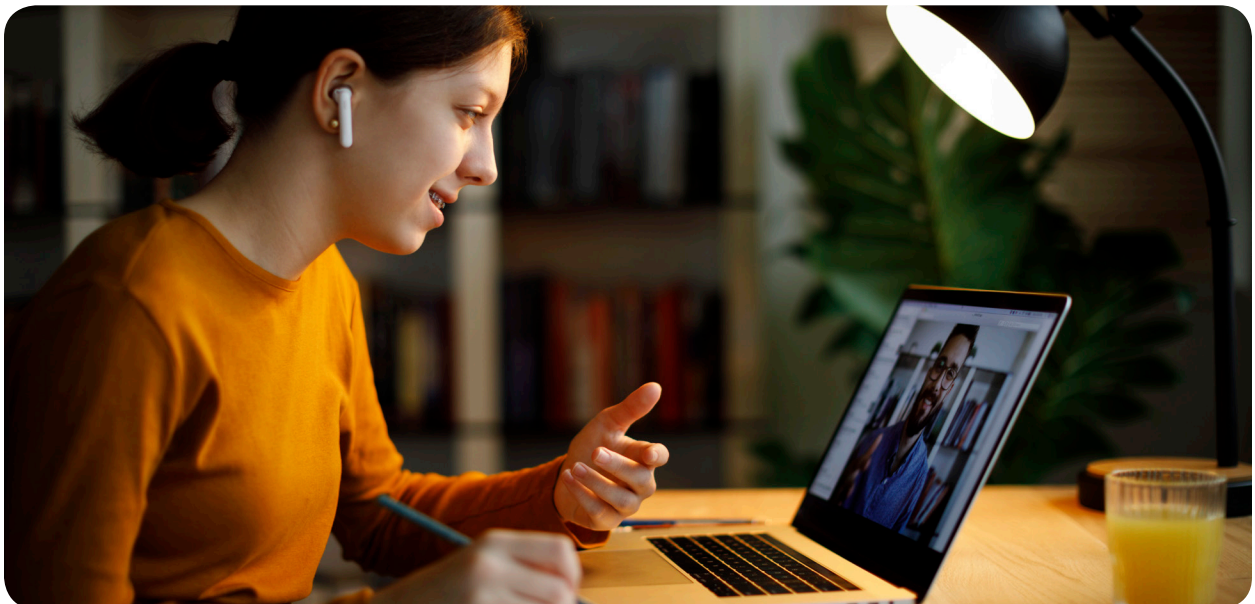
But where to start?

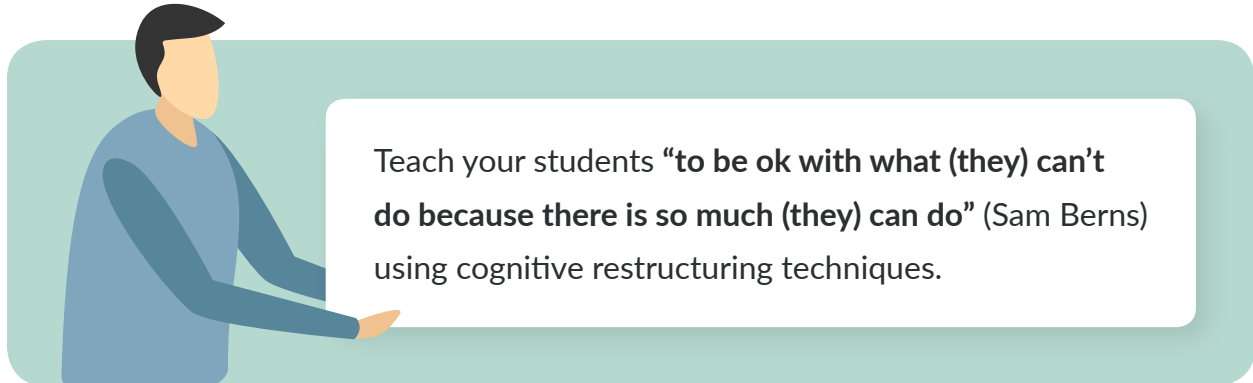
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## Catharsis opportunity through socialising

To eliminate or reduce negative emotions, students will need to have the time and space to verbalise their feelings. Allow students to share their experiences, compare them with one another, and express their frustrations and anxieties. It is then important to gradually lead them to focus on any possible positives that have come from lockdown, prompting them to recall a moment:

- they enjoyed the most during lockdown
- when they were most proud of themselves
- when they felt they grew personally
- when they discovered a personality trait they never knew they had
- when they realised they had gained new skills



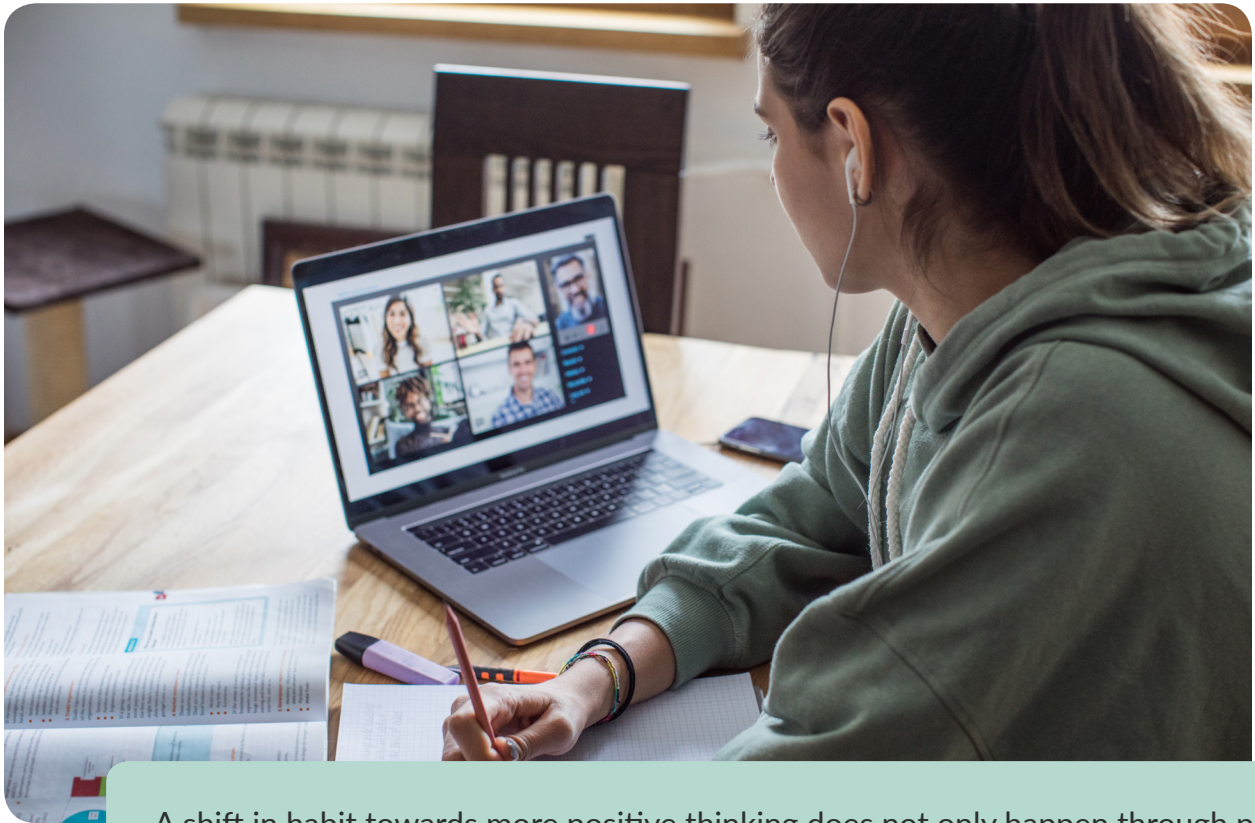


This branch of cognitive behavioural therapy develops processes by which individuals can be trained to change their way of viewing life. Some of these techniques can be simple and easily achievable.

One of my favourites is creating a ritual in which you start off the day with something inspiring, uplifting and positive. Morning homeroom is a great time for this. Students are coached to identify positive elements and sources of inspiration, in either photos, their surroundings or their everyday lives.

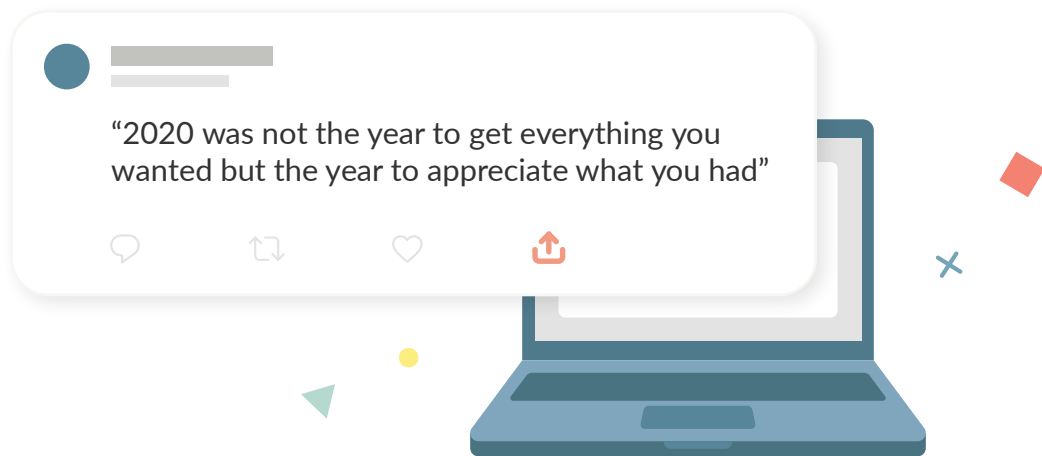
If they struggle to find something, encourage a “glass half-full” approach: inspire them with the lives of people who, even in hard times, found an opportunity to leave their comfort zone and thrive. E.g. Franklin Roosevelt, Frida Kahlo, Beethoven, Stephen Hopkins, or the touching stories of less well-known individuals such as [Sam Berns](#), a boy with Progenia or [Philippe Croizon](#), a man who lost both his arms and legs.





A shift in habit towards more positive thinking does not only happen through positive thinking itself. Students need to be made aware of the cognitive distortions which reinforce their negative thinking and emotions. Psychologytools.com has a great handout on 10 negative thinking habits – “[Unhelpful Thinking Styles](#)”.

Combine this with a simple mindfulness practice such as observing one’s own thoughts. Ask your students to pause, close their eyes and concentrate on an event. Then ask them to approach it from another point of view and see the situation differently. If their idea is not positive, decide whether their line of thinking was helpful and if they can identify any of the unhelpful thinking styles. You can use this simple technique in any situation where negativity is rising. Leading students to take the time to truly observe and analyse their own cognitive distortion should help them to distance themselves from their emotions, recognise their thinking patterns and then adjust them accordingly.



“2020 was not the year to get everything you wanted but the year to appreciate what you had” was shared, re-shared and then shared again on social media throughout the lockdown. This idea can be seen as a modern version of Horace’s “Seize the day without worrying about tomorrow” or “Carpe diem quam minimum credula postero”, the Epicurean approach to life.

Take this opportunity to (re)visit the work of this poet and his philosophical doctrine. **Discuss the Epicureans’ ideas with your class.** Lead your students to reflect on the nature of happiness and the misconceptions people have about it.



Remind them that, for Epicureans, happiness resides in savouring simple things. Findings show that people quickly get used to material goods. Pinpoint the concept of hedonic adaptation (i.e. the fact that no matter what someone’s dream is, they will soon be bored with it after reaching it). The happiness doesn’t last and its level does not always match the effort needed to reach it, so better to take pleasure whenever and wherever you can because “this too shall pass”.

## Stepping out of your comfort zone to spread acts of kindness

To thwart hedonic adaptation, research suggests undertaking new experiences like [learning new skills](#) or [visiting new places](#) and [practising generosity](#).



**Enable your students to use their strengths in new ways to support their community.**

It can be something as simple as developing a positive spirit by setting up a display of appreciation cards or fostering random small acts of kindness to develop more opportunities in your lessons to learn from serving others.

**Inspire students to be creative problem solvers and risk takers.** Youth Service America has put together some great ideas with scaffolding on [How Youth Can Help Communities Respond TO & Recover FROM the Coronavirus Pandemic](#). Their ideas respond to a wide range of needs and match different personality traits.





## Identifying mental triggers

To evaluate the academic readiness of students and elaborate on differentiation tools, subject teachers use pre-assessments. However, transposing this approach to emotions, mental strengths and engagement is not that easy.



**Introspection is challenging.** Even with the support of lists of core values and personality traits, people often struggle when evaluating their own qualities, and relying on friends' judgements might only give a partial view.

Yale University and the VIA Institute of Character have developed two very insightful free self-assessments.

- Their feedback on one's level of positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, accomplishment, health, negative emotions and loneliness ([Yale](#)) and
- 24 character strengths ([VIA](#)) will enable students to build on them.



## Creating a balanced life using community support

Throughout covid, most students have struggled to keep a healthy routine. Going back to school has helped them to restructure part of their day, but they still need help establishing a balanced life.

- **Suggest using online organiser apps** to colour-code their day in terms of work, non-essential screen time, socialisation, physical exercise and sleep. You can also ask them to highlight the time when they use their character strength. The results can be shocking and include a high percentage of low-value activities.
- **Making them reorganise their schedule**, talking about the huge toll that screen-time takes on bedtime and the knock-on effect that has on their health and exam results, and discussing the importance of physical exercise and listing all the possible sports allowed in your area may only play a small part in triggering a change in lifestyle.
- **Setting up a group challenge “new world, new you”** could be the key. Make them download a free habit challenge app which works completely offline, set SMART goals (specific, measurable, achievable, results-focused and time-bounded) and build a social support group by making them post their daily results on a class channel or social media.



## Remember the power of modelling positivity and open-mindedness

### **Be a human before being a teacher:**

don't hesitate to share your feelings, your struggles and your funny experiences.



**Set the tone with your positivity** and examples of the resilience techniques you have used. List the personal developments that you have undergone thanks to the pandemic. Remember that if you are light and creative in your approach to the situation, students will be inspired and enthused. A positive mindset is contagious!



**Offer your help, discuss problems.** You don't need to be a trained psychologist to help students step back and reflect. Reach out, be patient, flexible and open-minded. Due to the uncertainties of the near future (in particular with the possible lack of final exams), lots of students will be struggling with motivation.

**Show them why you love your subject.** Explain to them how your subject makes you who you are. Describe the skills and mindset it has brought to you. You can even tell them your story! Open the discussion with your students, ask them what benefits your subject can bring to them, make suggestions, be imaginative and fun! Refocusing on how your topic is meaningful in a wider context might take away some content time but it will help students to remember why it is relevant.

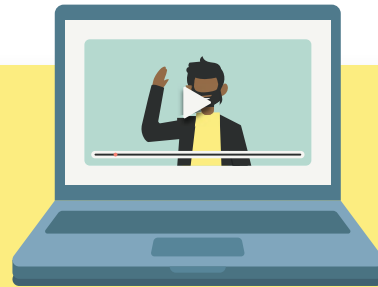
## Build on the learning curve

Both you and your students' IT skills have most likely dramatically improved during the lockdown. Continue the online revolution! Blended learning (learning that allows learners to utilise the best of both face-to-face and digital approaches) will help you pre-assess, differentiate and check progress faster and will eventually make the learning journey for your students more effective and personalised.



There are some great apps out there, so take the time to try them. Speak to the EdTech enthusiasts in your life to get their perspective.

**Train yourself:** there are some amazing free training courses run by Google, Microsoft, Adobe, and Intel teach.

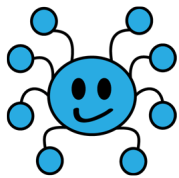


**E-learning is the way forward.** It facilitates enquiry and pushes students to develop their critical thinking and modern communication skills. The IB has already paved the way with the MYP e-assessment and I would not be surprised to see computer-based assessments becoming more generalised in a few years.



## From hands-on group work to online collaboration, modelling and building a supporting community

Due to covid restrictions, your class set-up has probably been rearranged into an exam hall layout. You may also be faced with the impossibility of running any kind of kinesthetic group activities. This does not mean that you have to go back to 19th century teaching.



**Encourage students to be creative** and help you to develop solutions. They can start by imagining a better seating arrangement for the classroom using online modelling tools such as [mindmup.com](https://www.mindmup.com) or more complex software such as [minecraft.net](https://minecraft.net) or [tinkercad.com](https://tinkercad.com).

Moving online can actually enhance the learning experience by removing constraints of the real world and using simulations instead.

For sciences and mathematics in particular, simulators can be a great way to visualise and play around with concepts that would otherwise be difficult to do in a classroom setting –



[explorelearning.com](https://www.explorelearning.com),

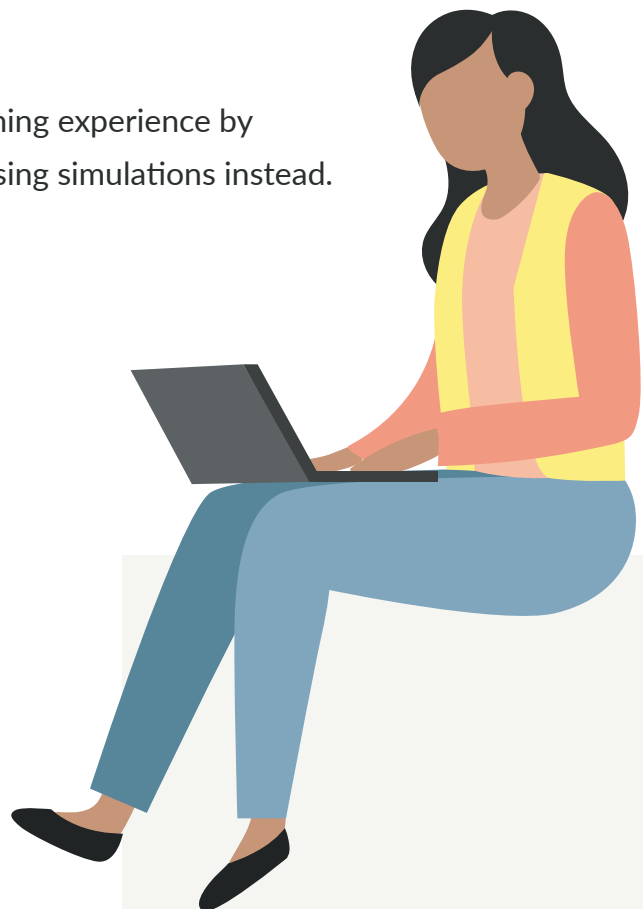


[geogebra.com](https://www.geogebra.com) or

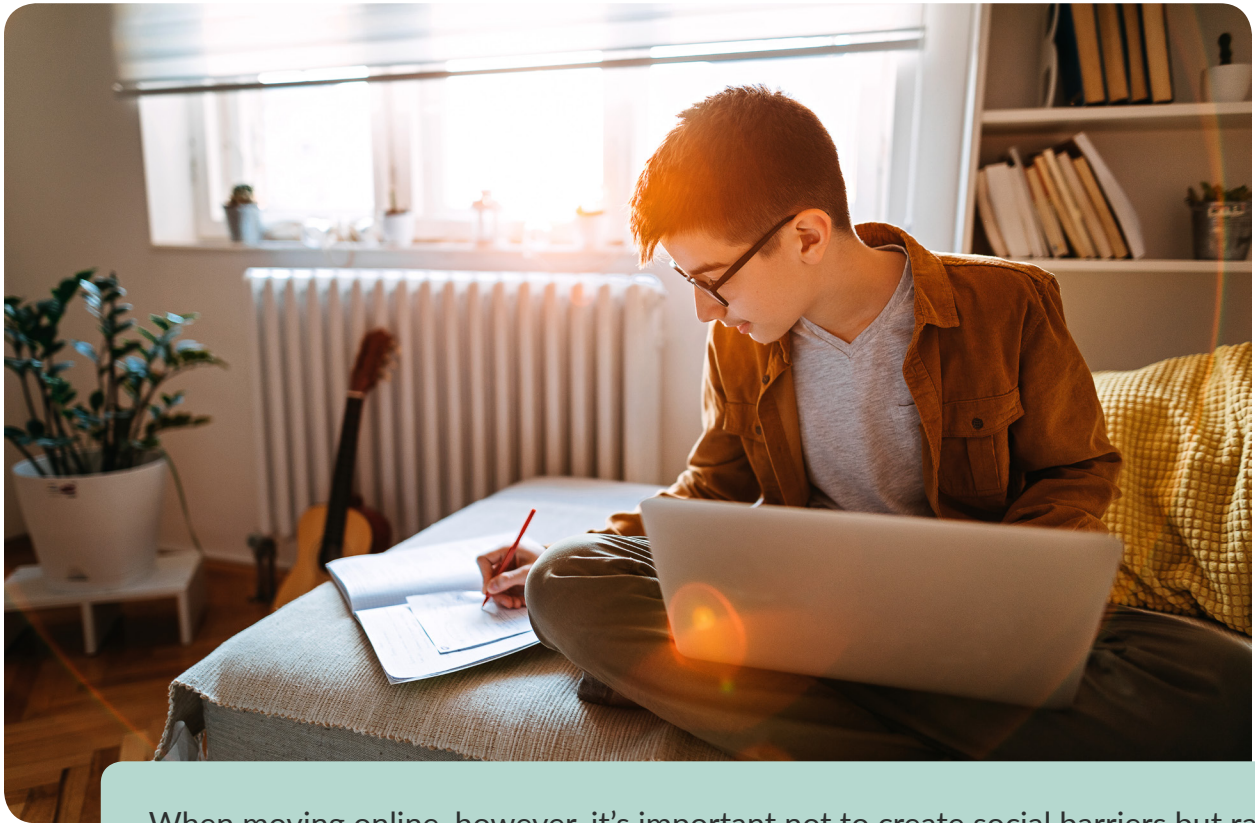


[desmos.com](https://www.desmos.com)

are all great examples.



## From hands-on group work to online collaboration, modelling and building a supporting community



When moving online, however, it's important not to create social barriers but rather to use apps to encourage communication and camaraderie. Apps and add-ons are also fantastic tools to get instant feedback and/or support from you or the community.

To organise group work or even revision, [Trello.com](https://trello.com) is very easy to use and helps to visualise to-dos.

To encourage each other, students can use emojis or praise each other, sending kudos and badges with apps such as [Central.com](https://central.com). [Polly.ai](https://polly.ai) make fast opinion polls. Or for more formal work [Eduflow.com](https://eduflow.com) enables students to give feedback on each other's work anonymously.

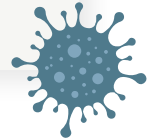
 **Trello**

 **central™**

 **Polly**

 **eduflow**

With covid restrictions, the class dynamic will struggle to be the same. Pace will need to be adapted to meet students' concentration spans and regular positivity boosts will be needed.



Using the Pomodoro technique will not be sufficient here. However, the answer could lie in gamification techniques.

Gamification or gameful learning does not necessarily mean including games in your lessons, but using the techniques of game mechanics such as whistles, timers, personal challenges and rewards to do something that would usually be 'boring'.

**Gamification enables you to increase the speed of students' work** (as they want to win) and – with instant performance-tracking and feedback – to increase students' effectiveness.

Gamification can be applied differently according to the subject. For more information, there are a lot of free training courses available, e.g. "Leading Change: Beyond Gamification with Gameful Learning" from the University of Michigan and Microsoft.





If you have classes that are harder to convince, the nudge theory might be the path you want to explore. Developed by Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein, two behavioural economists, this concept from behaviour science aims to change people's behaviour using positive reinforcement and indirect suggestions to try to achieve non-coercive change and/or compliance in the decision-making of groups.

There are amazing examples of nudges on the web that you can easily adapt to your classes.



Finally, **be kind to yourself.**  
You are a teacher, not a superhero!

### AUTHOR OF THIS GUIDE



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