

Ep #216: After-Break Blues



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With Your Host

Angela Kelly

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Hello empowered principals. Welcome to episode .

Welcome to *The Empowered Principal Podcast*, a not so typical educational resource that will teach you how to gain control of your career and get emotionally fit to lead your school and your life with joy by refining your most powerful tool, your mind. Here's your host certified life coach Angela Kelly Robeck.

Empowered principals, I have a very special announcement. I'm going to offer something I have never imagined that I would be offering in my business. So as all of you know, my mission in life is to help all of you as principals thrive as school leaders and enjoy the work you do, create work-life balance, get better results, do it in less time, make a bigger impact, create more income for yourself. All of the great things, right?

I want you to thrive as school leaders. I believe in school leadership. I love school leadership. I know the importance and the value of it to our communities, to children, to families, to the world. I also believe that this work, this coaching work to become an empowered principal is a gift not only to you in your life and how you experience your career, but also to staff and students and families and the world. This is a gift to all of us. It's a win/win.

However in some cases the best decision for a principal is to make a change. I'm not here to say that you're not capable or resilient or smart enough or good enough or strong enough. You've already proven that because you're in the position doing the work. So please do not take this invitation as a message that you're not strong enough. Sometimes it's just time to end the chapter and start a new one. I know that the last two years have been intense, have been a struggle beyond your imagination, beyond all of your imaginations.

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So if you're a principal who's considering a position or a career change, perhaps you want to leave the position of being a principal and go back to teaching or you want to move up and do something different or you want a career change completely altogether different. There are some things that you want to consider before you take the leap.

So for the first time ever, I'm going to offer a webinar on leaving school leadership. How to leave school leadership. It's going to help you decide number one, whether or not to leave. If so, when to leave and how to leave. I know this process very deeply because I did it myself just a few years ago. So I know what works. I know the pitfalls to avoid. I'm going to share all of that with you every step of the way.

I know offering this to school leaders doesn't make sense to my business because my work is predicated on cultivating school leadership and cultivating leaders who intend to stay in education, but that doesn't matter right now. What is needed in the world is to end the suffering of school leaders who want to lead but don't know how. I've done it. I have all of the answers that you need.

So please if you are struggling, if you are secretly considering leaving the position or leaving the career but you have no idea where to go or you feel trapped. You feel like you have to stay. I want you to put Thursday February 24th at 4:00 p.m. Pacific Time, so that would be 7:00 p.m. Eastern Time, on your calendars. I want you to commit to being there and attending this webinar live. I'm offering a webinar. I'm going to take you step by step. I will be on that webinar for as long as you need, answer any questions that you have.

So even if you're a principal who's planning to stay in the position but you're just not happy, this process will also help you clarify what you can do to feel better. So the registration link is in the show notes. I want you to pause this, sign up immediately. Be sure to spread the word. Invite your

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friends or your colleagues who you think will benefit from this conversation, who are also struggling, who are considering leaving. You know, we've had these conversations. "I would leave if I could but, but, but." All these reasons why we can't.

I'm going to show you how it's possible. I'm going to show you how to ensure that this decision is the right one for you. And if it's not, what you can do in the meantime. Because this conversation, this decision, is the most important one of your career. You do not want to pass this information by. So I look forward to seeing you there. Be sure to sign up immediately. Registration is required.

There will not be a replay. I do not plan to offer this again. It's a one and done time. For anybody who's struggling and considering either changing positions, leaving the position all together, or changing careers, this webinar is designed just for you. I feel very strongly about helping people who want out get out. So sign up today. I look forward to seeing you there. Okay. On with the show.

Well hello my empowered leaders and happy Tuesday. How are you doing? I'm doing fabulous by the way. I am packing right now. I am on my way to Louisville, Kentucky for my semiannual 200K Mastermind event with my master coach Stacey Boehman. She is teaching me how to create an amazing business for you all. I love it. I love her. I love this work. I'm so excited to be able to go to this live event, to be with all of my colleagues, my fellow life coaches. And to learn how to create more value for you. How to help you.

My goal as a coach is to help you love your job, love your life, and to create the experiences that you want in your life. How you want to create your career, the goals you want to achieve, how you want to live, how you want to experience life as a whole. How much money do you want to make?

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What kinds of relationships do you want to have with your family and your kids and your friends? How do you want to contribute to the world? What do you want to do outside of school leadership? How many students do you want to impact? How many teachers do you want to create into leaders? All of it.

So my job is to contain my brain, is to constrain it. I have so many thoughts and ideas about how to help you. My coach helps me filter them down into something that's easy, doable, digestible, understandable, applicable. Something you can apply quickly.

I'm really thinking my goal this year is how do I create faster results for school leaders? How do I get them loving themselves, loving their jobs, loving life, loving their school and doing so without hustle, without overworking, without burning out, without leaving the profession? How do we create joy and fun and success all in one package? That's my goal this year.

So I'm looking forward to my trip. I hope you guys are doing well. Let's dive in. This topic came up actually today, earlier today. Earlier today I was coaching a client. So I decided to jump on and do a podcast about it. Now I know when this podcast drops, it's going to be around the middle of February. I'm recording this in the middle of January about a week or two after most of you have been coming off of the holiday break.

So the title of this podcast is the After Break Blues. I'm going to talk about some of the things that have been coming up during the month of January, and it will go into February. So this is still relevant for you. If you're listening to this podcast in the future, you can apply this to any winter month or any time of season where you are experiencing kind of a dip in energy, a dip in morale.

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You're experiencing some chaos of in this case it's COVID that's going through. In past years it would be like the surge of the flu or strep throat or something would go through your school and wipe out a bunch of kids and families and people and staff members. You are left scrambling trying to cover for teachers or for assistant teachers or secretaries, nurses, counselors, all of it right. Everybody is out sick.

So you're coming back from those two weeks of lounging around and not working. Everybody was resting up and relaxing and having fun. Of course the brain is going to be in resistance when it comes back off a vacation or a break and it hasn't been asked to work. It hasn't been required to think and to manage itself. It's been indulging in a lot of food and activity and fun and pleasure. Yeah, our brains are naturally going to want to resist having to be disciplined and managed and producing results again.

So I just want to say all of our brains do that. They all throw little tantrums. It's our job when it's time to gear up to manage ourselves, to build in fun into our day so that getting back on track, being productive again, and coming back to work doesn't feel so dramatic, so negative.

I also want to bring up the thought around this time of year. My client was saying teachers are just feeling low energy. They're not really motivated or really excited. Everybody's kind of grumbling. Everybody's a little under the weather in terms of their emotions. They're emotionally under the weather when they're at work even when they're not physically sick.

I said to her look it's winter. We are in the season of winter. Winter is dark. It's cold. It's gloomy. We as animals have body rhythms according to the seasons, according to the sunlight. So we go into this hibernation mode as animals. We want to cozy up. We want to sleep more. We want our energy levels to go up even though physically they're feeling down.

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We're fighting against that nature response when our brain is telling us that we should feel light and motivated and excited and energetic like we do in the spring and in the summer, and even in the beginning of the school year we have all that high level energy.

I just want you to know that this is the balance of and that I've talked about in the past where sometimes we're high and energetic and motivated and enlightened and we're feeling really light and airy and fresh. There's other times where we're feeling dark and gloomy and cozy. We just want to snuggle up to a cup of coffee or a hot cup of tea. We want to be in our cozy clothing. We want to just snuggle up with our own kids or our families. This is just a part of winter.

So instead of thinking that it shouldn't be happening and wondering where's my motivation? Where's my energy? Just say oh yeah, it's winter. That's cool. I can still go to work and comfort myself knowing that it's winter and it's dark.

As I was saying to my client, in my school we had a social committee of teachers called the Sunshine Committee. So my client was saying how it just feels like the sun goes down so fast. It's dark in the morning. It's dark when they go home. I said you've gotta bring the sunshine, right? You've gotta find ways to bring the sunshine in for teachers and for kids and for ourselves during these dark months. So what can we do to lighten the mood or to feel good while also not being upset or resistant to the fact that it's winter? It just is, right?

I want to also acknowledge that we were talking about this time of year in the calendar year of school. So for most of you, I don't know if you go on trimesters or semesters or you go into four times a year, whatever that's called. I can't think of it off the top of my head. Into quarters, yes. That's the name of it.

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Okay so for us we were in trimesters. So this time of year that's around like end of November through February. Like December, January, February. This time of year, this second trimester of school, it feels the longest, especially January through March.

Here's why. We're in the very middle of the school year. So we're not in that honeymoon stage like we were at the beginning of the year where everything was super exciting and high, but we're also not at the end of the year, that excitement phase. So I feel like we have a honeymoon phase, then we have the middle, and then we have the end of year excitement phase where we're excited about the end of the year. Everything's ramping up. We're celebrating. Testing's done. We're wrapping up. It's such a fun time of year.

In the middle, there's kind of a meh, meh. Like a meh-ness that happens, right? I just want us to acknowledge that as well. In the middle, it seems like we've been in the school year for a long time yet the end of the year feels far away. This is part of the rhythm of the school year. Again, we want to acknowledge that yes we're in the middle of the year. We're not in the beginning. We're not certainly at the end. We're right in the middle. What do we want to do with this time?

I was saying to my client this is a great opportunity to ask your staff like how do we want to feel about this portion of the school year? We know this portion is temporary. It's not permanent. It's just a phase we go through during our school year. How do we want to think and feel about it? What do we want to do to make it feel better? There's nothing wrong with wanting to make it feel better. We just want to acknowledge that it feels yucky in the first place.

Here's the difference. When you think it shouldn't be and you're frustrated and you're grouchy and you're just unhappy in general and you're snapping at colleagues or kids or your boss even, that's not being productive and it's

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not helping you feel any better to be grouchy about it because you're in resistance. If you're like, "Oh, this is the part where I feel lethargic or low energy or I don't prefer that it's dark out. I don't prefer the cold." That's okay. You cannot prefer something, and how do we make the best of it? So be thinking about that.

Another thing that brings us down, the winter blues or the after-break blues, is when we come back from that break and we get into January and February, our minds start focusing on the gap. The gap between where we're at in this moment and that goal at the end of the year. For many of us, it's the test that looms over us.

In the first half we have all this high expectations and high motivations and we believe, we want to believe all kids are going to do well on the test. We're going to have test success and we're going to ensure that all kids are ready to go for the test. We have all this energy and hope and possibility and dreams in the beginning of the year in the fall.

Then we come back from that break and we're like, "Oh no, that's only a couple months away." Our brain starts to have thoughts about the amount of time we have left. We don't have enough time left to teach. Cover all the material. Create mastery prior to the test. When are we going to teach the kids test prep and teach the kids how to get comfortable with test taking in and of itself, right?

So we start to get panicky thoughts about how much time we have left and how much there is to do. We don't have enough time to cover it. Now we have to prioritize. What are we going to throw out? Which we tend to throw out, you know what we tend to throw out right? Fun, giving kids time. We end up pressuring ourselves because we feel that pressure to be perfect and get it right and cover it all. So we pressure ourselves as educators. We react to that pressure.

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Then we end up pressuring students. We shorten lessons. We cram more into a day. We rush them through their learning process. Which as we know helps them feel less prepared than if we let them continue on going deep into their learning giving them time and perhaps covering less with the expectation that if we teach them how to think, we teach them how to problem solve, we give them time and energy to work on that that perhaps that might the solution, right?

Typically what we do is we react to the stress and the pressure and the worry and fear that pops up when we come back from break. We also start negotiating the goal because we don't think we can achieve it. So in the beginning of the year, we might say we're going to get our test scores up five percentage points. We start off the year with full belief and commitment. We map out our year. We plan the pacing guides. We think we're going to just nail it day by day. We're gonna stay on schedule. You guys know that never works, right. We don't really do that.

So what happens is the beginning of the year we're full of hope and dreams and we have these great goals, and we really think we can achieve them. If you ask most teachers, they're like, "Yep, on a scale of 1 to 10, I'm an 8 or I'm a 10 in belief that we're gonna really make this year the best year yet." Then life happens.

So for this particular year, COVID right. We've been dealing with COVID for the last two school years. Before COVID was the flu season. Every year we have sub issues. Teachers get sick. Teachers resign. Teachers move around. We have sub issues. We've got kids out. We have parent volunteers who can't make it. They're getting busy and they're starting to back away. Our assistant staff or our support staff they start to get sick or their kids get sick.

We start to see that we're not on that schedule. That things aren't going as our brain wanted them to. Little by little it kind of chips away at our belief.

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This is all happening subconsciously. Then what happens is we think like well, we maybe aren't going to get five point gain but let's do a three point gain. If we can just get through subtraction before the test, at least they'll cover that. We start to negotiate with ourselves and reconcile that we're not going to hit that original goal so we settle for less. We drop in belief that we can achieve that original goal.

Every time we do this, when we give up on ourselves ahead of time, we're giving up on the kids ahead of time. Every time we do that, morale will subconsciously lower with kids, with students, even with families. We buy into this belief that we're not good enough to hit the original goal. We aren't doing enough. We get into this time scarcity. We get into the enoughness conversation.

We get into our thoughts about particular students. What they're capable of, what they're not capable of, who's going to achieve, who's not going to achieve. We get into some thoughts that if we looked at them and we examined them, we'd probably feel pretty bad about.

So we blame external things. We blame COVID or we blame the flu or we blame not having enough subs or we blame district office. We blame our principal, whatever. We blame, blame, blame, but that's just abdicating that responsibility because we're afraid we won't reach the goal. We don't want to be responsible for that goal because we would feel disappointment if we don't reach it. We would make that failure mean something bad about ourselves. We're not good leaders. We're not good teachers. We're not good students.

So what happens around this time of year is our belief in us and what we're capable of and our students and our teachers, it starts to wane. It starts to drop. So one of the things that I mentioned to my client as we were talking about this is reminding people of the original goal and building up that belief. Having conversations about how is it possible? How can we still do

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this regardless of COVID? Regardless of subs, regardless of people being out.

If you think about it guys, even if there wasn't a thing as COVID there'd be something else. There'd be a different kind of flu strain. There'd be pink eye. There'd be a lice case. We as human beings get sick, right? Every year schools go through what I call the illness era. We have the flu sweeps through or everybody gets a cold or strep throat. Now we've got COVID.

So principals and teachers, all of the staff are in high resistance to COVID. COVID has become a dirty word, right? We don't want to hear about COVID. We don't talk about COVID. We're tired of it. We roll our eyes and we're like, "Oh, COVID." I was talking with my client and she said, "All day long I'm dealing with COVID. I don't want to do this. This is not how I want to be spending my day."

So we talked about her resistance to the reality is what's creating her stress. She said, "I'm stressed. Teachers are stressed. Everybody's super stressed." I said the reason you're stressed is because you are arguing against reality. For those of you who are Byron Katie fans, Byron Katie says when we argue against reality, we only lose 100% of the time.

So what happens with our brain is that we think something should be different than it is. The reality of what we're dealing with shouldn't be there or it should be a different way. That incongruence is what generates stress. So if we lean into accepting the truth of what is, accepting that COVID's a part of our life now. Accepting that even if COVID were completely eradicated, we still have other viruses impacting us.

When we lean into accepting the reality of what it is that we're dealing with then we're more open to coming up with a plan for it. We're more open to saying look, I know as a school leader I'm just going to block off the first two hours of my morning to deal with sub coverage, moving people around,

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trying to get people to cover yard duties, calling home, contact tracing, quarantining. Whatever it is that you're, however you're spending your time with COVID thinking that you shouldn't be doing that or you don't want to be doing that, that doesn't make you feel good. It give you the winter blues.

So instead of telling yourself I don't want to be doing this. I shouldn't be doing this. I should be doing something else. I invite you to consider putting it on your calendar and accepting it as this is part of what I'm dealing with right now knowing everything is temporary. You will figure this out. You will get through it. You can handle anything that comes your way. So can teachers. You want to remind them of that.

Okay? So when I ask my client what are teachers stressed out about she said basically the unknown. They're not sure if they're going to get COVID, if they're not going to get COVID. Which students are going to get it, how long as they going to be out? How much homework packets do I need to create? What happens if I'm out? Then I have to do subplans. So lots of anxiety around the COVID virus.

First of all, I just want to acknowledge it. Yes, we all have anxiety about it. I'm still hanging out at home for the most part. For those of you who are going into work, it's understandable there is some anxiety there. I want you to allow the anxiety, to acknowledge it. To be okay that you're feeling nervous of the unknown. We don't know what's going to happen with the virus or how many kids you're going to have out or the status of their wellbeing.

So given that uncertainty, we want to ground ourselves in what we do know is certain. Certainty comes from our thinking. It comes from what I call productive thinking. Yes there are tons of uncertainties out in the world, but here's what we know to be true no matter what. We are going to be okay. There are going to be hard days, but we'll figure them out. We can handle

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whatever comes our way. Things always seem to work out one way or the other. This situation is temporary.

We're all on the same team. This situation, this adverse situation which feels like a mini crisis right now, it's actually building up our teammates, building up our resilience as a team. Building up our strength and our resolve to be a teammate. I want to know that if I'm out sick, my teammates have my back. I want to be the teammate who has their back if they are out. If we had those thoughts, we'd be bonding together and feeling really good about helping one another. Even though that work is hard, even though we're tired, we can approach the job with positivity.

So you want to be thinking about what are the blessings of this adversity we're going through? How is it helping us? What systems can we create in response to it? How are we better off for having dealt this?

So finally I'll just say this. 100% of our stress as school leaders and as teachers comes from our thoughts. Stress is the result of resisting reality. When we think something should be different than it is, there's that incongruence between the reality of what's happening and our thoughts about it. Our thoughts that it shouldn't be happening or that it should be different.

So in order for you as a school leader to feel less stressed, in order for your teachers to feel less stressed, you have to do this work first in order to get yourself grounded and calm. Then you can expose your teachers to this work. So you want to acknowledge the stress.

Here's the thing. People, if you go in and say there's no need to be stressed. You don't need to be stressed. Just feel good. They're going to highly resist that. That's not what they want to hear. They want to and they need to physically say what's on their mind. You want them to brain drain. You want them to tell you how are they feeling and why are they feeling it?

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Let them get it out. It has to be acknowledged. The stress and the fears and the doubts and the anxiety, all of that negativity has to be acknowledged first. You want to get it out of their bodies. Just let it vent all out.

Then you want to notice the thought. You want to show teachers what they're thinking, how they're feeling, and what they're thinking. How those thoughts are creating that stress. Put them on a chart paper. Let them see it.

Notice like oh, of course I feel this way. Look at how I'm thinking. I'm all up in COVID's business telling it what it should be doing and what it shouldn't be doing. We're trying to control something completely out of our control. No wonder we're frustrated. It's like banging our head against the wall. We cannot move the wall with our head. We can't move COVID or change COVID with our thinking or our mad feelings about it, our frustrations about it.

When we're feeling stress, how are we showing up for kids? How are we showing up for teachers? How are we showing up for parents? It doesn't feel good to choose stress every single day. It doesn't change the situation. It doesn't change COVID.

So if we can get to the place where we're like oh, I see it. We ask ourselves the question is this how we want to experience our work? Is this how we want to show up in the middle of the year? This precious time of year where we have time to teach before the test even though we know kids are going to be sick, even though we know we're at risk of getting sick. Our jobs were at risk of catching illness prior to COVID. We'll always be somewhat at risk because human beings get sick sometimes, and kids love to share their germs. We've all been sick as teachers and as principals.

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So just know we want to keep it as in perspective, and we want to decide okay. Given we've got COVID and given we've got the flu and there's all kinds of things out there to be worried about, is this how we want to show up and experience our life as school leaders? Our life as teachers? If not, let's come up with a plan to experience this middle period of the year in a way that feels better. Explore what also might be available. What also might be true.

Yes the negative part of the school year is there. Yes the winter blues are there. We want to let them be there. We also have the agency to control how we might be thinking about this year positively. What we might be bringing to the table to that can energize people and help them feel better.

Embrace this part of the year. What's great about this part of the year? You're not having to teach processes. In the beginning it's like so much work to get the kids with the procedures and the protocols and the processes of the school year and you're training them. You're not doing that heavy lifting anymore. This is kind of a sweet spot in the year. Then the end gets crazy in the year. This is a little reprieve, a little breather. We want to just embrace that. It's okay if we're moving a little slower and taking things as they come. It's all good.

So how do you want to feel about the middle of the school year? How do you feel about the after break blues and the era of winter? The illness era that comes along every school year. What do you want to think and feel about it? What is your approach going to be this year and for years to come? Have an amazing week. Take good care. Stay healthy my friends. Be well. Take care of yourselves physically, mentally, and emotionally, and I will talk with you next week. Take care. Bye.

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learn more about the tools that will help you become an emotionally fit school leader.