WONDERING HOW early childhood educators can de-stress and not burn out? With the help of the MindfulEC project, which she started with two Harvard Kennedy School students while at the Ed School, former preschool teacher EMILY WIKLUND, ED.M.’18, offers five tips.

► Recognize the struggle. “Many career fields are stressful, but the teaching profession stands out because it sits right at the intersection of high demand and low professional support. Part of that professional support relates to pay. The average wage for early care providers is just above $10 per hour. Another part relates to professional learning opportunities, training, and time for planning and self-care. Teaching, particularly teaching young children, is also demanding in a physical, emotional, and intellectual way that too often goes unrecognized and inadequately supported. And teachers must be prepared to respond, often on their own, to so many different scenarios during the day, and the resulting fatigue can lead to burnout.”

► Recognize when other teachers are at their breaking point. “Many of the symptoms of burnout or unhealthy stress may not be obvious to others, but signs of fatigue, difficulty concentrating or attending to tasks, edginess and irritability, sadness, or detachment and isolation could indicate that a teacher is having trouble. Frequent unexplained or illness-related absences can be a definite sign that something is wrong. Disengagement from the teaching community or in the classroom can also be a sign that it’s time to check in.”

► Find community. Now. “At MindfulEC, we strongly believe that social networks and relationships provide an essential role in preventing or addressing stress. Teachers who have access to a community of support have a go-to system for affirmation, reflection, and solidarity. They have someone or a group of people they can talk to after a stressful day, and in talking they might get ideas about how to respond next time or simply some positive acknowledgment that things will be okay.”

► Reconnect to intention. “Ask yourself why you wanted to become a teacher in the first place. What have you always loved about working with young children and their families, and what are the short- and long-term goals for your work? Find meaning in your work.”

► Take time for yourself. “It’s important to develop a daily self-care practice or habits that bring calm between (inevitably) stressful moments. This can include yoga, mindful walking, or even mindful eating, which includes noticing and savoring textures and flavors. During the school day, which can feel hectic, teachers can find quiet spots during breaks, engaging socially with colleagues over lunch or at the end of the day. Self-care and strong community bonds aren’t luxuries; they’re essential components in providing quality experiences for children.”