

Trauma-Informed Pedagogy

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Starting premise: Teaching as a radical act of hope. (Gannon, 2020)

Context: Millennials report higher levels of mental health issues including “loneliness” (which aligns with clinical anxiety and depression)

How do we teach to the lonely, the fearful, and the stressed?

Learning Outcomes of the Session:

1. What trauma is
2. The impact of trauma on the brain and learning
3. Strategies that can mitigate the impact of trauma and aid learning

What Trauma Is

Trauma is an emotional response to the personal experience of a terrible event. Regardless of conscious awareness, the brain will react to threat with disengagement or potential reward with engagement.

Trauma: any negative event that results in a position of relative helplessness. This is COVID-19

The impact of trauma on the brain and learning

A variety of responses to trauma: physical, behavioral, psychological. All are normal responses to abnormal circumstances.

Brain structures relevant to trauma and stress:

- Prefrontal cortex- decision-making [With chronic stress: atrophy]
- Amygdala - fear/panic [With chronic stress: hypertrophy]
- Hippocampus - learning (consolidation, memory) [With chronic stress, atrophy]

What we are experiencing now, is an abnormal circumstance, an usual stress that is a form of trauma.

These structural changes affect learning:

- Decrease attention

- Perception
- Short term memory, and
- Decision making

Students in these circumstances may be having a hard time:

- Keeping track of changes in classes
- Making a decision about learning
- Prioritizing assignments
- Engagement with the class overall (including with instructor and classmates)
- Managing time
- Not quitting (the ability to stand in discomfort)

Mitigating Strategies

First, your own Well-Being: How are you (the instructor) coping with your own stress? Who/what is your own support system?

These concepts come from the literature on trauma-informed care

Inform: Communicate

- Talk about trauma.
- Normalize responses.
- Discern the difference between stress and a threat to life.
- Breathe (activates parasympathetic nervous system.
- Monitor and moderate news and screentime

Connect: Hospitality and Community

- Radical hospitality: Be present and communicate often.
- Show your intention to connect with students.
- Remind students how to connect with you (when and where you are available).
- Build community: Create optional discussion about daily lives (and participate).
- Suggest students check up on each other and facilitate it (assign buddies or groups)
- Allow space for beauty (as it exists in your discipline)

Protect Hope and empathy

- Reflective hope:
- Grounded empathy: Offer structure. Be flexible in it and offer autonomy (with options)

Redirect: Get back to learning

- Focus on material you've already covered.
- Autonomy: offer options to explore topics that weren't going to be part of the course.
- Talk about the future: when we get back to campus...

More Resources:

IHE: "Leveraging the Neuroscience of Now: Seven Recommendations Helping Students Thrive in Times of Trauma"

<https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2020/06/03/seven-recommendations-helping-students-thrive-times-trauma>

This Webinar: [Trauma Informed Teaching & Learning \(for teachers\)](#)

Cited in the Chronicle's "Teaching" Column:

<https://www.chronicle.com/article/What-Does-Trauma-Informed/248917>