

Trauma and Homelessness

What exactly is trauma? How does it relate to the experience of homelessness?

Trauma is a physical and psychological response to extraordinarily stressful events and experiences. When a person has experienced trauma, they have experienced something so distressing that it has overwhelmed their body and brain's ability to cope.

We all experience difficult things in life. However, with trauma, difficult or harmful experiences continue to negatively affect a person's well-being and ability to function in everyday life.

Homelessness is connected with trauma in a number of ways

First, a person who is facing homelessness has often experienced a series of traumatic events prior to the trauma of homelessness. For some, this trauma may include childhood abuse, neglect or household dysfunction. For others, these traumatic experiences may include more recent crises and losses, including the death of a loved one, divorce, abuse or intimate partner violence, job loss, financial hardship, eviction or mental health crisis.

No matter if a person experienced trauma earlier in life or more recently, it is important to understand that homelessness is not as simple as being "without housing." People who are experiencing homelessness have often lost a sense of home, community, stability or safety.

Secondly, the experience of homelessness — not knowing where one is going to sleep, what you are going to eat or where you can go for help — is often

traumatic in and of itself. It also puts you at risk of further trauma, because you are now in a situation where you are more likely to experience danger.

Many students experiencing homelessness have faced traumatic events, such as being exposed to violence, experiencing losses, and dealing with severed relationships.

Traumatic experiences deeply challenge a person's fundamental belief that the world is a safe place and that people can be trusted. Because of this, people who have undergone trauma may feel unsafe in new environments or have difficulty in relationships.

Many people who have experienced trauma have come to expect control, manipulation or harm from others instead of kindness or goodness. People may also believe that a better future is simply not possible — anything once hoped for is out of reach.

Trauma can also make it more difficult to regulate emotions and behaviors. This means that, at certain times, a person may feel tense, jumpy, anxious, overwhelmed or on high alert, while at other times, a person may feel numb, disconnected, withdrawn or “shut down.” This response has its own logic — logic influenced by the experiences of harm that have come before, or even the expectation of further harm to come.

Children, adolescents and teens in your classroom have experienced or are experiencing ongoing trauma.

According to studies from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 60% of adults report experiencing abuse or other difficult family circumstances during childhood and 26% of children in the United States will witness or experience a traumatic event before they turn four.

Some classroom signs of trauma:

- Extreme shyness and difficulty engaging with others
- Disproportionate reactions to setbacks and unexpected changes
- Trouble managing strong emotions (extreme anger, excessive crying, etc.)
- Clinginess
- Difficulty transitioning from one activity to the next
- Forgetfulness
- Frequent complaints of feeling sick
- Difficulty focusing
- Lack of safety awareness
- Missed deadlines
- Poor academic performance
- Apathy and lack of effort
- Perfectionist tendencies
- Physical and/or verbal aggression

The impacts of trauma can be far-reaching, long lasting, and impact students' ability to access their education. There are small ways, however, that we can make our classrooms more friendly and supportive to students managing the impacts of trauma.

These strategies can positively support most students with or without a history of trauma:

- **Communicate with counselors or social workers.** Besides providing specific information about your students, these are great resources for more information about recognizing and understanding the impacts of trauma.
- **Provide structure and consistency.** Write the agenda on the board. Use entry and exit routines. When a student knows what to expect, it can help him/her to feel safe.
- **Transitions.** Give time warnings ahead of activity transitions (“3 minutes until we switch groups...”). Warn ahead of doing something unexpected, such as turning off the lights or making a loud sound. If possible, prepare students for fire drills.
- **Provide choice.** People with trauma history experience a lack of control. Provide safe ways for students to exercise choice and control within an activity and within the environment (choice of seats, choice of book, etc.).
- **Develop strengths and interests.** Focus on an area of competence and encourage its development to contribute to positive self-concept.
- **Be there.** A lot of working with students with trauma history is just showing up, every day, and accepting the student no matter what behaviors emerge. Be an adult in that student’s life who is going to accept him and believe in him, no matter what - children can never have too many supportive adults in their lives.
- **Make an “out” plan.** Create a way for a student to take space if he/she feels triggered or overwhelmed during class.
- **Take care of yourself.** One of the most important things to remember. If you work with even just one student who experienced trauma, you can experience vicarious trauma or compassion fatigue. Use your own support system and make time to do things that fill your tank.

What Teachers Need to Know About Childhood Trauma

1

Kids who have experienced trauma aren't trying to push your buttons

2

Kids who have been through trauma worry about what's going to happen next

3

Even if the situation doesn't seem that bad to you, it's how the child feels that matters

4

Trauma isn't always associated with violence

5

You don't need to know the cause of trauma to help

6

There's a direct connection between stress and learning

7

When kids feel they're good at something and experience success, it builds their resilience

8

Self-regulation can be a major challenge for students suffering from trauma

9

It's OK to ask kids point-blank what you can do to help them make it through the day

10

You can support kids with trauma even when they're outside your classroom

