Trauma sensitive youth work

by Yuliia Dem

Trauma-sensitive youth work aims at restoring and supporting the self-regulation of young people. It recognizes the signs of trauma and acknowledges the impact of trauma. It means working with understanding and softness and provides a safe environment and structure that allows and enables young people to feel safe again and take regulation into their own hands.

This chapter provides the basic concept and tools to get started with trauma-sensitive youth work.

Trauma-sensitive approach

Going through severe stress and traumatic experiences is universal. It is something that not only young people with refugee backgrounds experience. It is something that most of us experience. Verz often thanks to our coping mechanisms and resilience we are able to self-regulate stress and trauma.

Trauma sensitive youth work can enable or strengthen self-regulation. It is an approach that focuses on working with understanding, care and softness. It offers a safe environment and structure. If youth workers can ensure that young people can feel safe again and provide a supportive environment and tools, young people can restore their self-regulation.

Self-regulation can be a challenge or even impossible for young people with severe traumatic experiences. And some might need professional support. In these situations, youth workers should refer them to professional institutions that work in the field of crisis intervention and trauma therapy (see also the chapter on Psychological First Aid LINK).for it.

If we can keep it in mind with compassion it could help us to be more inclusive and equal in the work with people. Trauma sensitive youth work is about creating a safe environment for young people. It means being careful with the stories of others and about awareness that everyone brings his/her own story into the youth encounter. If we can keep this in mind and approach young people with compassion it could help us to make youth work more inclusive and equal.

Being trauma-sensitive means keeping the needs of trauma-impacted participants and learners at the forefront of your planning and decision making. Considering trauma-impacted participants will help in providing a safe/brave environment to help young people deal with the immediate impacts of trauma while building resilience to better handle future trauma in their lives.

Effects of trauma

Trauma	Effect	Required
1. Fled from a (perhaps always unsafe) homeland	Fear of unexpected sounds	Remain calm and be predictable
2. Having lived temporarily in different places/countries	Confusing about structure	Clear structure and continued connection
3. War, terror or experience of torture (of family members)	Grief, anxiety, having missed role models	In needed: mental health practitioner*
4. Hunger, cold, lack of hygiene during the flight	Slower brain development	Compassion, understanding and patience
5. People smugglers who (can) use violence	Difficulty trusting (adults)	Predictability and be trustworthy
6. Lack of education and relaxation	Lower self-esteem because of new language and difficulty adapting to new structure	Patience and calmness
7. Fear of dying themselves or fear that parents may die	Lack of trust	Compassion
8. Encounters with unknown cultures, languages and people	Either flexibility and/or mistrust	Patience
By Hélène van Oudheusden		

* Youth workers need to be aware of their own competence and engage in help if needed. In the work we may observe and when needed connect with specialists such as mental health practitioners or psychologists. It is not a task of youth workers to deal with traumatic responses, but youth workers may create supportive environments where young people safely could cope with their own triggers.

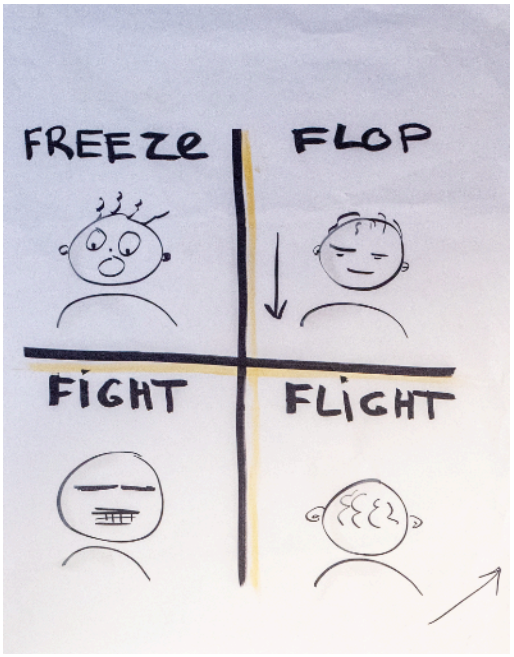
Not all traumatic experiences lead to the need to have extra specialists, but some do.

Brain and trauma

People have always had some exposure to stress and trauma. In this approach we look at trauma as ‘frozen’ stress in our body. Throughout human history, there have been many physical dangers - wild animals, neighboring tribes, etc. How dangers could be different but our body reacts the same[1].

- **Freeze** - stopping, not moving, tension in muscles, no breathing. Freezing can be physical or mental in nature.
- **Flop** - avoiding, intention to become invisible, hiding. Body could go limp, breathing is broken or no breathing.
- **Fight** - overreacting, physical or verbal reaction, aggression. Physically - tension in muscles, intense fast breathing.
- **Flight** - run away, rapidly removing from traumatic situations. Flight reactions also can be physical or mental in nature. Body could go limp, breathing is broken or no breathing.

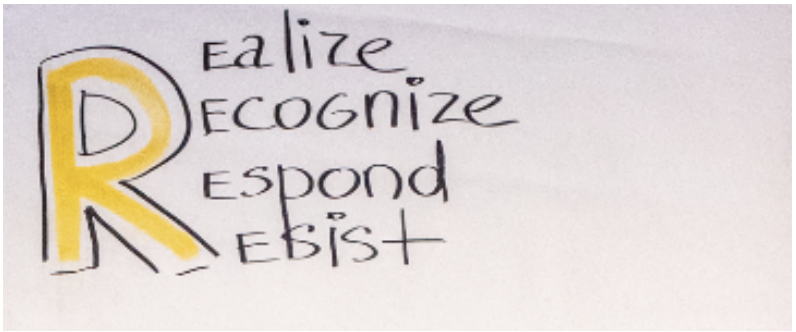
[1] *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers* (1994, Holt Paperbacks/Owl 3rd Rep. Ed. 2004) ISBN 0-8050-7369-8



Reactions to trauma and stress, visualisation by Yuliia Dem

How to deal with trauma-response

- **Realize:** trying to understand the situations some young people are experiencing
- **Recognize:** being observant so you can see the signs of trauma and the triggers of youth responses to trauma
- **Respond:** responding in productive way to youth reactions to impacts to trauma
- **Resist:** resisting judgmental responses to trauma.



Reactions to trauma-responses, visualisation by Yuliia Dem

Self-regulation practice - ABC Centering

Centering is an embodiment practice for self-regulation, managing one's own state and building resilience.

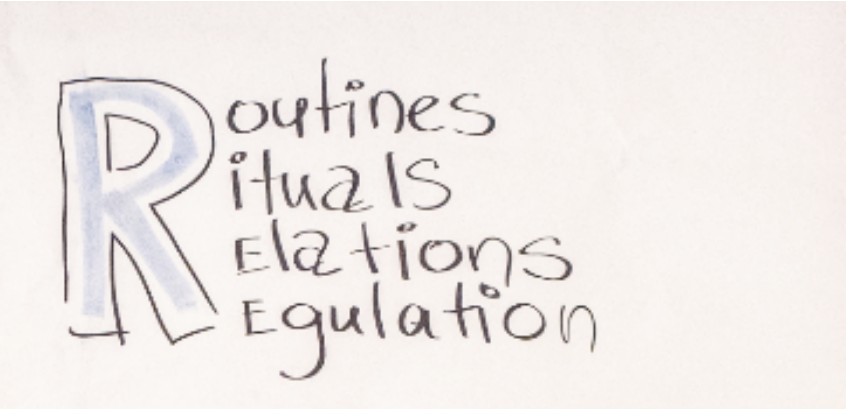
Embodiment centering is a great tool to regulate fight-flight stress response and step out of it.

- **Aware**: be mindful of the present moment using the five senses, especially feeling the body, ground (chair and/or feet) and your breath
- **Balance**: in posture and attention; have an expansive sense of 'reaching out' (a visualization of glowing light a bulb may help)
- **Core relaxed**: relax your mouth and stomach; breathe deeply into your belly
- **Connected**: look for, or bring to mind, people you care about and who care for you, people that respect you; look for what you have in common with others present

Video: https://youtu.be/O7s3GKZOmkw
Video created for Basic mindfulness course for youth workers within Strategic partnership project '(YOU)th in the moment' under Erasmus+ programme

Good practices

- **Routines:** having friendly and consistent process
- **Rituals:** designing processes, ceremonies and celebrations to help young people feel valued and special
- **Relationships:** developing and nurturing positive relationships with youth
- **Regulation:** Providing process and strategies to help young people cope with, de-escalate, or let go of emotions associated with the trauma or traumatic situations.



Good practices, visualisation by Yuliia Dem

What else could be helpful

1. Supporting development of self-awareness and body-awareness
2. Active movement (for example shaking)
3. Walk on the fresh air or nature
4. Connecting learning and emotions
5. First Aid relaxation Kit
6. Art
7. Healthy nutrition
8. Mindfulness

Reflection: How does trauma and reflection effect your work

Questions for reflection

1. *What is your most common stress-response? How do you notice that?*
2. *What kinds of trauma effects you may meet in your work? How do you coop with them?*
3. *What else can you do to create a trauma sensitive environment?*

Additional Resources

Hélène van Oudheusden - Teaching Refugee Children: A Hero's Journey

John F. Eller, Tom Hierck - Trauma-Sensitive Instruction: Creating a Safe and Predictable Classroom Environment

Mark Walsh - Working with the body in training and coaching

Paul Linden 2007 - **Teaching children embodied peacemaking**: Body Awareness, Self-Regulation and Conflict Resolution

Sam Himelstein wY: The 4 Essentials of Being a Trauma-Informed Youth Professional

Charlotte V. O'Brien and Divine Charura: Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy - Refugees, Asylum Seekers, and Practitioners' Perspectives of Embodied Trauma: A Comprehensive Scoping Review