Small Steps to Start Implementing a Trauma-Informed Practice in Your Course

Studies estimate that over half of U.S. adults experience some sort of trauma before the age of 18, with higher occurrences for marginalized populations (CDC, 2021). These numbers indicate that many of our students have incurred some level of trauma that continues to impact their learning. Most likely, you feel overwhelmed and unprepared to address these issues in the classroom. However, employing Gunderson et al.'s (2023) checklist tool can serve as a good way to start in creating a "safer, trigger-free, trauma-informed learning" environment in a traditional, hybrid, or online course (82).

Gunderson et al. (2023) notes that faculty can empower their students to have more agency over their own learning by adding in class options and pathways to express themselves; collectively these aspects can help students set "boundaries and meet their own learning needs while working through their trauma" (82). Starting out by making small changes in your practice and, over time, building in additional practices can help you create a strong foundation that recognizes, responds to, and improves the learning environment for all students.

Building a Trauma-informed Classroom

Emotional and behavioral outcomes of traumatic events can reveal themselves in several ways: for example, inability to focus, poor attendance, low motivation, struggle to learn new things, anxiety, depression, and/or physical pain such as migraines (Gunderson et al, 2023; Hoch et al, 2015). To address student needs in a course, Gunderson et al. used the Center for Disease Control's six principles to create a safe and supportive environment to create a checklist grounded in evidence-based instructional design and teaching practices. The checklist addresses some very basic steps in areas that you are familiar with, such as course design, digital tools, and community building; however, the checklist also includes more detailed, comprehensive strategies that can expand your pedagogical approach across all phases of the course.

Course Design

Creating an intentional learning environment starts with small actions that can make a difference, such as adding a trauma statement to a syllabus. Faculty can personalize a trauma statement by emphasizing awareness and open communication. For example,

> *As a student, you may experience a range of challenges that can interfere with learning, such as stressful life events, experiences of anxiety and/or depression, self-harm, substance use, and/or unusual difficulty with ordinary life activities. The increased stress of school can also make existing mental health struggles more difficult to manage. If what you are experiencing is affecting your course work, please speak with me. (University of North Carolina at Asheville's Syllabi Statements, n.d.)*

Other course design aspects Gunderson's checklist mentions include the following:

- Choose content that does not minimize or romanticize trauma.
- Provide options for readings, roles, and assignments.
- Give trigger warnings for some topics, content, or discussions.
- Build a supportive community with opportunities to collaborate, provide feedback, and practice with low/-no stakes assignments.

Digital Practices

The checklist also pinpoints approaches to make digital spaces more trauma-informed as well. You may already poll students and enable them to vote anonymously; carry this over into other areas as well, such as letting your students post or annotate anonymously or create avatars to facilitate their ability to communicate. Other suggestions on the checklist lend themselves to shifting passive learning to active (Gunderson et al., 2023).

- Creating classroom community agreements to facilitate collaborative work.
- Posting options: text, audio, video.
- Allow students to choose virtual backgrounds or personalize their workspaces.
- Unlimited attempts to re-record themselves for podcasts/audio tasks.

- Use their own trigger warnings in posts.

Community Building

Building and sustaining a community that enables all students to participate and learn is challenging; however, adding components centered on course interactions will not not only help students who have experienced trauma, but all students. A good first step to start the semester entails having students help you develop course goals and objectives about effective interaction and communication in the course. Co-creating protocol focused on communication and interaction can not only establish boundaries but it can also facilitate the following:

- Effective peer communication and feedback.
- Create space for marginalized students to contribute
- Promote effective collaboration
- Encourage co-teaching and peer-to-peer communication and teaching

A commonly held misconception is that students' trauma responses will increase when they encounter related experiences or topics so avoiding trauma-related topics in the classroom is best practices; however, it is quite the opposite if educators manage communications properly (Gunderson et al, 2023). IImplementing trauma-informed checklist items is a good way to start rethinking your course because even small changes can prove invaluable to your students and their learning processes at Oakland University.

References

Gunderson, R. L., et al., (2023). An instructor's guide for implementing trauma-informed pedagogy in higher education. *The Journal of Faculty Development, 37*(2), 80-86.

Hoch, A. et al., (2015, May). Trauma-informed care on a college campus. Presentation at the annual meeting of the American College Health Association, Orlando, Fl.

University of North Carolina at Asheville (n.d.) Syllabi statements about mental health and trigger warnings.

Related Teaching Tips and Resources

- Essential Conditions for Student Learning
- OU Resources for Student Immediate Needs
- Trauma-Informed Pedagogy

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