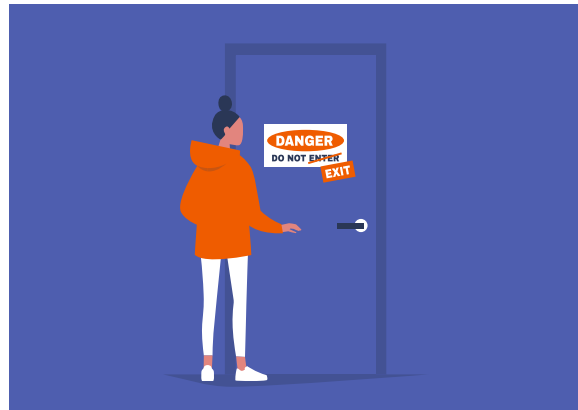


# EQ @ Home or School

Welcome to **EQ @ Home or School**, an online or in-class series to help build meaningful relationships among students and teachers and equip students with social-emotional and academic skills they need to navigate the opportunities, choices, and challenges of school and life.

Amidst COVID-19 conditions, the need for emotional intelligence (EQ) is ratcheted to the next level. You and your students have experienced unprecedented threats to your health and well-being these last months. The emotional stress and uncertainty of COVID-19 has seeped into the fabric of families, schools, and society.

In March 2020 schools and businesses closed abruptly. There was little warning and definitely no instruction manual about how to suddenly work and school from home. As teachers and administrators, you likely scrambled to develop online lesson formats. You might have “Zoomed” for the first time and adapted quickly to try to continue to educate and communicate with your students from a distance. If you are also a parent, spouse, and/or caretaker, your home environment likely had a significant upset as well.



Similarly, your students have experienced significant upheaval these last months. For some, being home from school felt like a long, boring summer break. For others, their home was unstable and even unsafe. Some may have lost someone to COVID-19 and many are experiencing financial hardship and job loss within their families. For all, the social distancing and instability around the world has taken its toll. Students and teachers are returning to learning feeling weary, weathered, and possibly afraid.

**One of the greatest underlying causes of stress is change and uncertainty.** March 2020 to date has been a constant state of change and uncertainty. Few have been immune to its effects, and for some it has been truly traumatic.

## Trauma-Informed Care Intro

**Trauma-informed care is good practice for all students**—not just those who have experienced significant trauma or adversity. All students benefit from a caring, supportive trauma-sensitive learning environment. But for students who have experienced trauma or live with ongoing toxic stress, **trauma-informed care is imperative for learning and healing.**

## Understanding the Impacts of Trauma and Toxic Stress

We use the term “traumatic” carefully and sparingly. Thankfully, the need for trauma-informed care is now being recognized nationwide. States/schools across the country are implementing, and in some cases mandating, trauma-informed training and protocol. But when overused, the true, dire need for trauma-informed care can sometimes be underestimated. For that reason, we will explore the history and science of trauma that can sometimes result in **post-traumatic stress disorder**, also known as **PTSD**. We will also talk about toxic stress that may be prevalent in some students’ lives and homes.

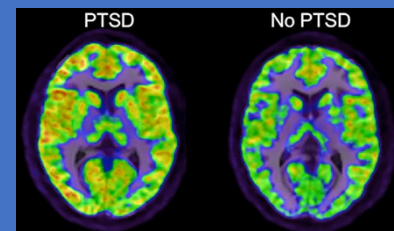
For generations, soldiers returned from war “not themselves.” Once easy-going, ambitious, or happy-go-lucky, they came back from combat withdrawn, easily agitated, and on guard. They shared similar stories and symptoms of restlessness, nightmares, flashbacks, trouble sleeping, and trouble focusing. Most found themselves alone in their memories and struggling to re-assimilate into the lives they left before the military. Similarly, people who survived natural disasters, car accidents, violent crimes or physical/sexual abuse shared these same symptoms and experiences. Despite time and the greatest efforts of loved ones, many struggled to regain their footing and maintain close relationships.

Now after decades of interventions with PTSD survivors and new MRI and PET scan technology, we have significant new insights into the experiences and treatment of trauma. As seen in the graphic to the right, brains that have experienced trauma and remain in a state of post-traumatic stress show significantly more brain activity while in a resting state than brains that have not experienced trauma. Their brains may remain alert and on guard throughout the day. And then at night, if they can sleep, they may be revisited by heightened flashbacks of past events. This interrupted, restless sleep leaves little room for REM deeper sleep and recovery.

Not surprisingly, many wrestling with the repercussions of trauma find drugs or alcohol one of the only comforts to help their brains disengage from pain and anxiety. Sadly, while emotional numbness serves to disconnect from the pain, it can also result in disconnection from people, from authentic pleasure, and from progress toward recovery.

True PTSD affects a small portion of school-aged children and adolescents, but a larger percent live with some level of **toxic stress** from toxic home environments with acute or prolonged neglect, adversity, or verbal, physical, or sexual abuse. Many children adapt and

### PTSD Brain Scan Comparison



PET images indicate higher mGluR5 receptor availability in an individual with PTSD compared to a healthy comparison participant.\*

### Common PTSD Repercussions

- 1) Anxiety, sleep problems, and hypervigilance
- 2) Flashbacks/nightmares
- 3) Emotional numbness
- 4) Adapted coping strategies

\* Brain scan research retrieved from [news.yale.edu/2017/07/17/new-ptsd-study-identifies-potential-path-treatment](https://news.yale.edu/2017/07/17/new-ptsd-study-identifies-potential-path-treatment)

live in “survival mode” to navigate the unpredictable or unsafe arena of their homelife. Their brains emulate hyper-alertness and defensiveness similar to PTSD, so they remain “on guard”—both physically and emotionally—even in safe environments. Their brains tend to produce higher levels of cortisol (the stress hormone) than what’s normal or healthy. Brains naturally trigger cortisol to protect us in emergencies, but for youth who live with steady stressors, this overproduction of cortisol furthers their state of anxiety and makes it harder to stay focused and connected. Some disengage—purposefully or out of exhaustion—to self-protect and find calm.

COVID-19 times have likely turned up the toxic stress level within many home environments. Even the most well-balanced students and their parents have been tested and worn down by isolation and anxiety. Many need reprieve and new strategies to continue to make the best of the current situation.

Additionally, isolation alone can have a significant impact on mental health and well-being. Making meaningful connections with other students, teachers, and caring adults is essential to healing from COVID-19 isolation and stressors.

### Toxic Stress Indicators

- > Experienced strong or prolonged exposure to adversity, violence, neglect, or illness
- > Trouble sleeping or eating
- > Increased anxiety, aggression, or hyperactivity

## Ensuring a Trauma-Informed Learning Environment

Understanding the neurological impacts of trauma and toxic stress, it is important to **create a learning environment that is calm, predictable, supportive, empathetic, and safe**. But as a reminder, all students benefit from these same dynamics. What works for traumatized students is also effective with students who have not experienced the same levels of adversity.

Trauma-informed strategies are built into most of the format and lesson content of EQ @ Home or School. For instance, as students learn more about active listening and acting on empathy through the lessons, so should the teachers who are facilitating them. The EQ skills embedded in the lessons most essential and transferrable to trauma-informed care are:

- **DS2.2: Checking In with Ourselves and Others**
  - Use class check-in times to build relationships and help students connect to you each other, and the emotions they are feeling.
- **DS6.1: Understanding Empathy for Others**
  - Try to put yourself in the shoes and the mind of the student. Why are they acting out? Or withdrawing? What unmet needs are they trying to satisfy?
- **DS2.3: Practicing Active listening**
  - Use “EARS Active Listening” to patiently listen, reflect students’ feelings, and paraphrase what you hear.

- **DS4.1: Understanding the Cause and Effects of Stress**
  - Understand that when a student is emotionally charged (anger or stress), they are not thinking clearly. Their limbic system (the emotional center of the brain) has hijacked their neocortex (the thinking center of the brain). They need time to cool down and regulate before they are ready to problem-solve, apologize, or take responsibility.
- **DS4.3: Analyzing Stress Management Strategies**
  - Help students manage strong emotions. Guide them to: #1 Time out (time alone until they have cooled down), and then “talk it out,” “walk it out,” or do whichever stress management strategy works best for them.
- **DS4.4: Applying Stress Management Strategies**
  - Help students recognize when they are in “yellow zone” (starting to feel irritated or anxious) before they escalate to “red zone” (emotionally fired up and not thinking clearly).
- **DS7.2: Understanding Group Dynamics**
  - Realize any group (including classrooms) goes through stages of forming, storming, norming, and performing. If you do not spend time on group norms for treating each other kindly (DS2.1) early in the forming stage, it can be hard to get past the storming stage.
- **DS7.2: Making Relationship Deposits**
  - Look for ongoing opportunities to make “deposits” in your relationships with students (e.g., taking interest in their interests, listening, supporting) and beware of relationship withdrawals (e.g., negative comments, sarcasm).
- **DS7.4: Solving Problems and Boosting Relationships**
  - When conflicts arise (either between students and/or between you and a student), use the SOLVE problem-solving steps.

Putting all these steps together, if a student is acting out or disengaged or especially out of character that day, try to talk to them one-on-one. Start by looking for indicators if the student is too emotionally charged to think clearly (e.g., high levels of anxiety or anger). Trauma experts Jim Sporleder and Heather Forbes recommend starting a high-emotion conversation with the question:

- *“On a scale of 1–10, how high is your stress level right now?”*

Students will have learned to identify and measure physical and mental stress indicators with lessons DS4.1–DS4.5. Give them time to assess their stress level and time to cool down if needed.

When the student is emotionally ready, gently share your observations about why you are concerned, e.g., *“I can understand why you’re angry. I understand angry. Are you ready to talk more about it?”* Here is when EARS active listening” (DS2.3) is essential. [Actually, EARS is relevant all day long, but especially when students need support and counsel.]

Listen to the student's perspective. When they pause and when appropriate, reflect feelings ("You're really mad") and summarize what you hear ("So a lot happened at lunch. I didn't realize that happened before class."). As students share their perspectives ("Talk it Out," Stress Management Strategy #3), it helps them diffuse hot emotions and move closer to rational, logical thinking.

Often when a conflict arises, it's easy to skip these steps and go straight to problem-solving or consequences. Giving your students time and space to find calm is time well spent. Ideally, having a place in your classroom or on your campus for students to calm down will help them regulate their emotions before they lead to regrettable behavior.

Most important to trauma-informed supports is a relationship with a caring adult(s). Knowing your students on a personal and interpersonal level will help guide them in both good times and bad. The "Check-ins" and "Check-outs" embedded in every lesson set the groundwork for deeper interventions when you need them—and help you recognize which students may need Tier 2 or Tier 3 supports. Some students' needs will be apparent from the beginning, but many of even your quiet "on-track" students will surprise you with unrecognized needs.

*"When you learn to make decisions out of love instead of fear, you will never be misguided. The answers will come when you are looking through the lens of trauma and unconditional love."*

—Sporleder & Forbes (2016)  
*The Trauma-Informed School*

### **Bolstering Protective Factors**

When your students return to learning this fall (online or in class), they will likely bring with them a level of toxic stress residue and reservations from COVID-19 fallout. If they are continuing to school from home, they'll need additional strategies to stay connected and feel supported.

In all cases and at all times (with or without COVID-19), all people benefit from social-emotional **protective factors** in their lives.\* Decades of research in risk and resiliency confirm that supportive relationships are essential to health, well-being, and brain function. Students who feel connected and cared for are more likely to resist risk factors and tap into their best selves.

EQ @ Home or School lessons are built to support meaningful relationships among students and caring adults. **As authors, our number one goal is to have all students connected to at least one caring adult on a school campus.** The content of these lessons is undoubtedly important, but more important are the relationships that will help boost students' well-being and inspire them to want to learn and incorporate EQ skills into their lives and future.

*"Buffers [protective factors] make a more profound impact on the life course of children who grew up in adverse conditions than do specific risk factors or stressful life events. They appear to transcend ethnic, social class, geographical, and historical boundaries."*

—Werner & Smith  
*Overcoming the Odds (1992)*

\*Benard, B. (2004). *Resiliency: What we have learned*. WestEd.

The EQ @ Home or School content purposefully (*but subtly*) integrates key protective factors within the 36–lesson series. Each module parallels and scaffolds the protective factors listed. →

Modules 1 and 2 focus on building a supportive learning community and practicing key communication and collaboration skills. Modules 3 and 4 are about self-awareness and self-management for both emotional management and time/study management. Module 5 applies protective factors to bouncing back from challenges. Modules 6 and 7 are about bolstering relationships within families, school communities, and the larger world. And Module 8 closes with developing a sense of purpose and plans for your future.

In the context of a caring class environment, students learn from steady doses of reflection, application, practice, and connection with their classmates and teachers. The videos in every lesson also help appeal to visual learners and a generation raised with YouTube content.

The “Check-in” and “Check-out” discussion questions and class activities are **not optional**. In fact, they are the foundation of this intervention and the learning experience. As heard before, “*Students don’t care about how much you know until they know how much you care.*” Your relationship with them and accountability for them is an important part of the formula that will make this EQ @ Home or School experience effective and memorable.

Besides, you’ll probably have a lot of fun teaching these lessons(!) Everything you need to know is included in the videos, check-ins, check-outs, and handouts. From there, you can make it your own and enjoy the process. Having this time in your school schedule for meaningful connections and EQ skill building can be a game changer for your students and enrich your teaching experience.

For more info on trauma-informed care, we highly recommend *The Trauma-Informed School: A Step-by-Step Implementation Guide for Administrators and School Personnel* (2016) by Jim Sporleder and Heather Forbes.

### Protective Factors Embedded in EQ @ Home or School

- ☑ Connection to a caring adult
- ☑ Positive connections w/ peers
- ☑ Social competence
- ☑ Communication skills
- ☑ Opportunities for autonomy
- ☑ Problem-solving skills
- ☑ Sense of purpose and future
- ☑ Accountability & Expectations



### EQ @ Home or School Modules

- ① Returning to Learning
- ② Creating a Supportive Learning Environment
- ③ Studying Effectively Remotely or On Campus
- ④ Managing Stress Before It Manages You
- ⑤ Bouncing Back from Challenges
- ⑥ Building an Empathetic and Inclusive Community
- ⑦ Navigating Relationships in Tight Quarters
- ⑧ Making Plans for Your Future

