



Trauma-Informed Support

Being Aware and Empathetic of Student Needs

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

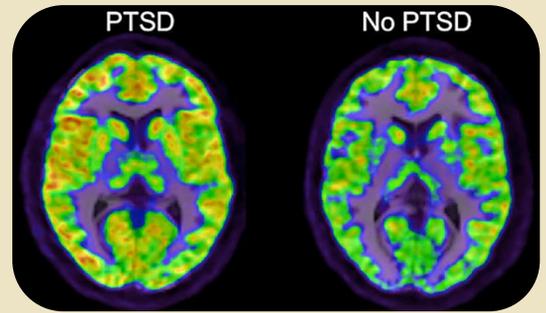
We use the term “traumatic” carefully and purposefully. Thankfully, the need for trauma-informed care is now being recognized nation/worldwide. Schools are implementing, and in some cases mandating, trauma-informed training and protocol. But when overused, the true, dire need for trauma-informed care can sometimes be diluted and underestimated. For that reason, it’s important to know more about the history and science of trauma that can sometimes result in **post-traumatic stress disorder, also known as PTSD.**

For generations, soldiers returned from war “not themselves.” Once easy-going, ambitious, or happy-go-lucky, they returned from combat withdrawn, easily agitated, and on guard.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 reassemble 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 above, 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 deeper REM 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, authentic happiness, and progress toward recovery.

PTSD Brain Scan Comparison



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

* Retrieved from news.yale.edu/2017/07/17/new-ptsd-study-identifies-potential-path-treatment

Common PTSD Repercussions

- Anxiety and hypervigilance
- Sleep problems/deficits
- Flashbacks/nightmares
- Emotional numbness
- Adapted coping strategies



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True PTSD affects a small portion of school-aged children and adolescents, but a larger percentage live with some level of **toxic stress** from home/community environments with acute or prolonged adversity, neglect, and/or verbal, physical, or sexual abuse. Many children adapt and 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 is considered 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 anxiety and makes it harder to stay focused and connected. Some disengage—purposefully or out of exhaustion—to self-protect and find calm.

Toxic Stress Indicators

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

The years of COVID conditions likely turned up the toxic stress level in many home environments. Even the most well-balanced students and their parents were tested and worn down by isolation and anxiety. Many needed reprieve and new strategies to make the best of their 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 isolation and stressors.

Ensuring a Trauma-Informed Learning Environment

To **create a learning environment that is calm, predictable, supportive, empathetic, and safe**, it’s essential to understand the neurological impacts of trauma and toxic stress. 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.

The hyper-vigilance that often accompanies PTSD symptoms can make crowded, loud, or unpredictable environments especially triggering. All five senses can be affected to some degree by PTSD. To empathize with and support students...

- **Be aware of heightened senses.** As possible...
 - **sight:** try warm light (floor lamps), inspiring quotes, organized classroom (*See the check-in demo video with Ms. Holton Trautwein for a great example of creating a welcoming class environment.*)
 - **sound:** avoid startling noises or chaos; consider peaceful music during study times
 - **touch:** (for counseling settings - comfortable chairs, lap blankets)
 - **taste:** healthy, delicious snacks (e.g., string cheese, cookies, grapes, nuts)
 - **smell:** subtle aromas or fresh food
- **Embed predictability:** Introduce reliable routines to add a sense of stability and control
- **Reinforce safety:** If making seating charts, be aware that some students may be uncomfortable with their back to the door or with someone sitting behind them or too close. The “Magic T” recommendation from S-C Lesson 1.6 (sitting in the front and center) is good for many students, but not all.

School-Connect Lessons Through a Trauma-Informed Lens

Trauma-informed strategies are built into most of the format and lesson content of School-Connect 4.0 and EQ @ Home or School. For instance, as students learn more about active listening and acting on empathy through the lessons, so do the teachers facilitating them. The S-C skills embedded in the lessons most essential and transferrable to trauma-informed care are:

- **Lesson 1.4: Understanding Your Brain**—Keep in mind that when students are emotionally charged (anger, stress, fear, anxiety), they are not thinking clearly. Their limbic system (the brain’s emotional center) has hijacked their prefrontal cortex (the brain’s rational center). They need time to cool down and regulate before being ready to problem-solve, apologize, or take responsibility.
- **Lesson 1.7: Checking In with Ourselves and Others**—Continue to use class check-in times to build relationships and help students connect with you, each other, and their emotions. Check the “Get Connected” lesson boosters for ongoing check-in options.
- **Lesson 2.4: Using Active Listening**—Use “EARS Active Listening” to patiently listen, reflect on students’ feelings, and paraphrase what you hear.
- **Lesson 2.6: Communicating with the Adults**—The N.I.C.E.R (Notice, Initiate, Connect, EARS active listen, and Re-connect) steps are good reminders for adults as we look for opportunities to connect with students.
- **Lesson 4.1: Preparing for Group Projects**—Realize any group (including classrooms) goes through stages of forming, storming, norming, and performing. Getting past the storming stage can be difficult if you don’t spend time on group norms for treating each other kindly early in the forming stage.
- **Lesson 5.2: Working Toward Empathy**—Try to put yourself in your student's shoes and mind. *Why are they acting out or withdrawing? What unmet needs are they trying to satisfy?*
- **Lesson 5.3: Checking for Blind Spots**—Even with the best intentions to empathize with students, research shows we are unconsciously more likely to empathize with people or experiences with which we are more familiar. If students have a different perspective than your own, it will take more purposeful effort to put yourself in their shoes.
- **Lesson 6.3: Monitoring and Managing Emotions**—Try to 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.
- **Lesson 6.1: Developing Positive Relationships**—Look for ongoing opportunities to make “deposits” in your relationships with students (e.g., taking an interest in their interests, listening, supporting) and beware of relationship withdrawals (e.g., negative comments, sarcasm).
- **Lesson 6.4: De-escalating Conflict**—Help students recognize when they are in the “yellow zone” (starting to feel irritated or anxious) before they escalate to the “red zone” (emotionally fired up and not thinking clearly).
- **Lesson 6.5: Using Problem-solving Strategies**—When conflicts arise (either between students and/or between you and a student), use the SOLVE problem-solving steps. If a student is acting out or disengaged or especially out of character that day, use these steps together 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) before proceeding through SOLVE. *(See next page for more de-escalation strategies.)*



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Helping Students De-escalate from High-Emotion Situations

When a conflict arises, it's natural to try to go straight to problem-solving or consequences. Giving students time and space to calm down before they do or say something regretful is essential. Having a plan and a place in your classroom or on campus for students to calm down will help them regulate their emotions before they lead to regrettable behavior. It could be allowing them to sit in a designated comfy chair in your classroom, excusing them to walk to the water fountain, or encouraging them to take deep breaths at their desks.

“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 a lens of trauma and unconditional love.”

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

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 Lesson 1.7: Checking in on Ourselves and Others. Give them time to assess their stress level and cool down if needed.

When the student is emotionally ready, gently share your observations about your concerns, e.g., *“I can understand why you’re angry. I understand feeling anger. Are you ready to talk more about it?”* Here is when EARS active listening (Lesson 2.4) is essential. [Actually, EARS is relevant all day, 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”*), it helps them diffuse hot emotions and move closer to rational, logical thinking.

Bolstering Protective Factors

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 (Benard, 1991).

School-Connect lessons are built to support meaningful relationships among students and caring adults. **As authors, our number one goal is to connect all students to at least one caring adult on a school campus (an “anchor point”).** 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 S-C 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 events. They appear to transcend ethnic, social class, geographical, and historical boundaries.”

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



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The School-Connect content purposefully (but subtly) integrates key protective factors within the 80-lesson series. Each module parallels and scaffolds the protective factors listed. →

Knowing your students on a personal and interpersonal level will help guide them in both good times and bad. The “Check-ins” and open-ended questions embedded in the lessons set the groundwork for more profound interventions when needed—and help you recognize which students may need Tier 2 or Tier 3 support. Some students’ needs will be apparent from the beginning, but many of even your quiet “on-track” students may surprise you with unrecognized needs.

Protective Factors Embedded in S-C

- ✓ 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

Participating (as a teacher) in the check-ins, class discussions, and activities is an important part of the support structure and learning experience. As heard before, “Students don’t care about how much you know until they know how much you care.” Your relationship with and accountability for them will make this School-Connect experience effective and memorable. Research shows that teachers who adopted an empathetic mindset (listening to students’ concerns, fostering trust, and adapting to the school environment) had fewer students requiring detention than those teachers who used a traditional disciplinary approach (Okonofua et al., 2016).

Besides, you’ll probably have a lot of fun teaching these lessons! The videos, lesson outline, and handouts include everything you need to know. From there, you can make it your own and enjoy the process. Having this time in your school schedule for meaningful connections and skill-building can be a game-changer for your students and enrich your teaching experience.

