Trauma & Trauma-Informed Pedagogy

AWARENESS | RECOGNITION | COMPASSION

TRAUMA DEFINED

“Trauma is an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape, or natural disaster. Immediately after the event, shock and denial are typical. Longer term reactions include unpredictable emotions, flashbacks, strained relationships and even physical symptoms like headaches or nausea.”

AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION, 2014

“Trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.”

SUBSTANCE ABUSE AND MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES ADMINISTRATION, 2019

What does it mean to be trauma-informed?

“To understand the ways in which violence, victimization, and other forms of trauma can impact individuals, families, and communities.

To use that understanding to inform policies and practices in order to prevent (re)traumatization and promote resilience and growth.”

Carello, 2020
Butler, Critelli, & Rinfrette, 2011; Harris & Fallot, 2001
POTENTIAL EFFECTS OF TRAUMA ON THE BRAIN

*The neurobiological evidence suggests that the aspects of cognition that we recruit most heavily in schools, namely learning, attention, memory, decision making, and social functioning, are both profoundly affected by and subsumed within the process of emotion; we call these aspects emotional thought.*

Yang & Damasio, 2007

Trauma can impact hormonal regulation (e.g., increased release of cortisol) and brain function, particularly in the:

- Prefrontal cortex: rational decision making and attention
- Amygdala: fear responses
- Hippocampus: consolidation of memory

Trauma, particularly in early childhood, can effect brain development such as:

- Development (maturation) of brain structures
- Neuroendocrine and physiologic responses,
- Coordination of behavior with cognitive emotional regulation.

Brunzell, Stokes, Waters, 2019; van der Kolk, 2003

What does this mean for students?

Trauma can affect decision making, memory, focus, and the ability to engage in learning at biological level.

Students may have a hard time:

- Keeping track of changes in your class
- Understanding complex directions/instructions
- Making decisions
- Prioritizing assignments
- Managing their time
- Self-motivating
- Engaging with classmates or subject materials
- Retaining knowledge
Types of Trauma

I: Acute Trauma
- Short term, unexpected event
- E.g., one-time rape, car accident, natural disaster

II: Individual Identity/Complex Trauma
- Sustained, repeated ordeal stressors
- E.g., ongoing abuse, combat, domestic violence

III: Collective identity trauma/continuous traumatic stress
- Ongoing systemic and/or cultural oppression
- E.g., discrimination, racism, sexism

Consider: it is possible that all three types are impacting students at this time.

Pre-Pandemic Stats on Student Trauma

- 66-94% percent of college students report lifetime exposure to one or more traumatic events
- Most common events: life-threatening illness, unexpected death of a loved one
- Percent meeting criteria for PTSD: 9-12%, many more may suffer subsyndromal symptoms

TIPS & REMINDERS FOR TRAUMA-INFORMED EDUCATORS

Engage self-care and healthy boundaries (and model it for your students)

Recognize and address signs of empathy fatigue, secondary traumatic stress, or vicarious trauma

Avoid negatively generalizing students or student behavior

Use intentional language: avoid sarcasm, scolding or defensive language

Compile local resources for students (therapy, crisis and community resources). Share visibly and often.

Provide trigger warnings for sensitive material

Take a deep breath. You’ve got this.