

# Trauma during a Pandemic

## Support for Trauma-informed Education in Postsecondary Systems (STEPS) Webinar Series

Provided by the Illinois Center for Specialized Professional Support (ICSPS)

February 11, 2021



# STEPS Webinar Series

- ▶ Feb. 4 Trauma-awareness in Postsecondary Settings
- ▶ Feb. 11 Trauma During a Pandemic
- ▶ Feb. 18 Trauma and Poverty
- ▶ Feb. 25 Historical Trauma
- ▶ April 29 Implementation Check-in and Support

# Today's Objectives

## Deepen

Deepen understanding of adverse experiences and resulting trauma in the context of the ongoing pandemic.

## Increase

Increase awareness of trauma's impact in postsecondary settings as well as trauma-informed practices to support learners.

## Create

Continue to create a community of learners as a resource for future support.

# Agenda



BRIEF REVIEW  
OF BIG IDEAS  
RELATED TO  
TRAUMA



THE  
PANDEMIC  
CONTEXT  
AND ITS  
IMPACT ON  
LEARNERS  
AND  
TEACHERS



TRAUMA-  
INFORMED  
VALUES  
IMPACTING  
PRACTICE



DEEPER DIVE  
INTO  
STRATEGIES



PARTICIPANT  
INPUT AND  
DISCUSSION

Trigger Warning:  
Please feel free to shift for  
the purpose of self-care...

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## What is trauma?

An **event**, series of events, or set of circumstances that:

- ▶ Is **experienced** by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful.
- ▶ Overwhelms a person's ability to cope.
- ▶ Has adverse **effects** on the individual's functioning and well-being.





Trauma is:

- ▶ Prevalent
- ▶ Neurological
- ▶ Highly Individual

# Survival vs. Thinking Brain

## Survival Brain

- Monitors for threat
- Sounds a neurological alarm
- Activates auto responses
  - Fight
  - Flight
  - Freeze
  - Fawn

## Thinking Brain

- Judges, makes decisions, controls emotions
- Provides a rational “brake”
- Goes offline during threat
- Helps the body come back into balance



# Trauma or stress?

“Traumatized people constantly feel unsafe inside their own body.

The past is alive in the form of gnawing interior discomfort.

Their bodies are constantly bombarded by visceral warning signs...”

Bessel van der Kolk, M.D.  
The Body Keeps the Score



## Emotional

- Irritability, sadness, anxiety, depression, guilt, grief, fear, apathy/numbness, agitation, trouble forming relationships

## Behavioral

- Withdrawal, aggression, crying, worry, risk-taking, difficulty communicating/listening, blaming, regressed behaviors

## Physical

- Headaches/stomachaches, heart racing, fatigue, muscle pain, disrupted sleep/appetite, heightened startle response

## Cognitive

- Difficulty processing information, confusion, difficulty concentrating, forgetfulness, racing thoughts, preoccupation with event, intrusive thoughts/memories

# Resilience

**A positive, adaptive response to significant adversity.**

Resilience is supported by protective factors including:

- ▶ Adaptable, caring, and supportive relationships
- ▶ A sense of mastery over life circumstances
- ▶ Affirming cultural and/or faith traditions
- ▶ Safe, supportive environments (schools, communities)



# A Trauma-Informed Approach

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**Realizes** the widespread impact of trauma and understands potential paths for recovery;

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**Recognizes** the signs and symptoms of trauma in clients, families, staff, and others involved with the system;

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**Responds** by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices; and

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Seeks to actively **resist** retraumatization.

# A Journey

- ▶ Trauma-Aware
- ▶ Trauma-Sensitive
- ▶ Trauma-Responsive
- ▶ Sustainable  
Implementation of  
Trauma-Informed  
Practice





# Trauma during Pandemic



# Collective Impacts of Pandemic

- ▶ Entire groups of people and societies can collectively suffer the effects of traumatic experiences, such as war, mass violence, genocide, and pandemics (Aydin, 2017).
- ▶ Previous and current pandemic research has provided insight into how pandemics may affect the mental health of the general population.
- ▶ Research has indicated increases in stress, traumatic stress, and post-traumatic stress disorder (especially for medical professionals or those directly impacted), depression, feelings of hopelessness, anxiety, panic, and grief (Douglas et al., 2009; Kamara et al., 2017).

A close-up photograph of a woman with dark hair, looking down with a distressed expression. Her right hand is pressed against her forehead, with fingers spread. The background is blurred, suggesting an indoor setting. The overall tone is somber and reflective.

# What are many of us experiencing?

**Intense stress** related to:

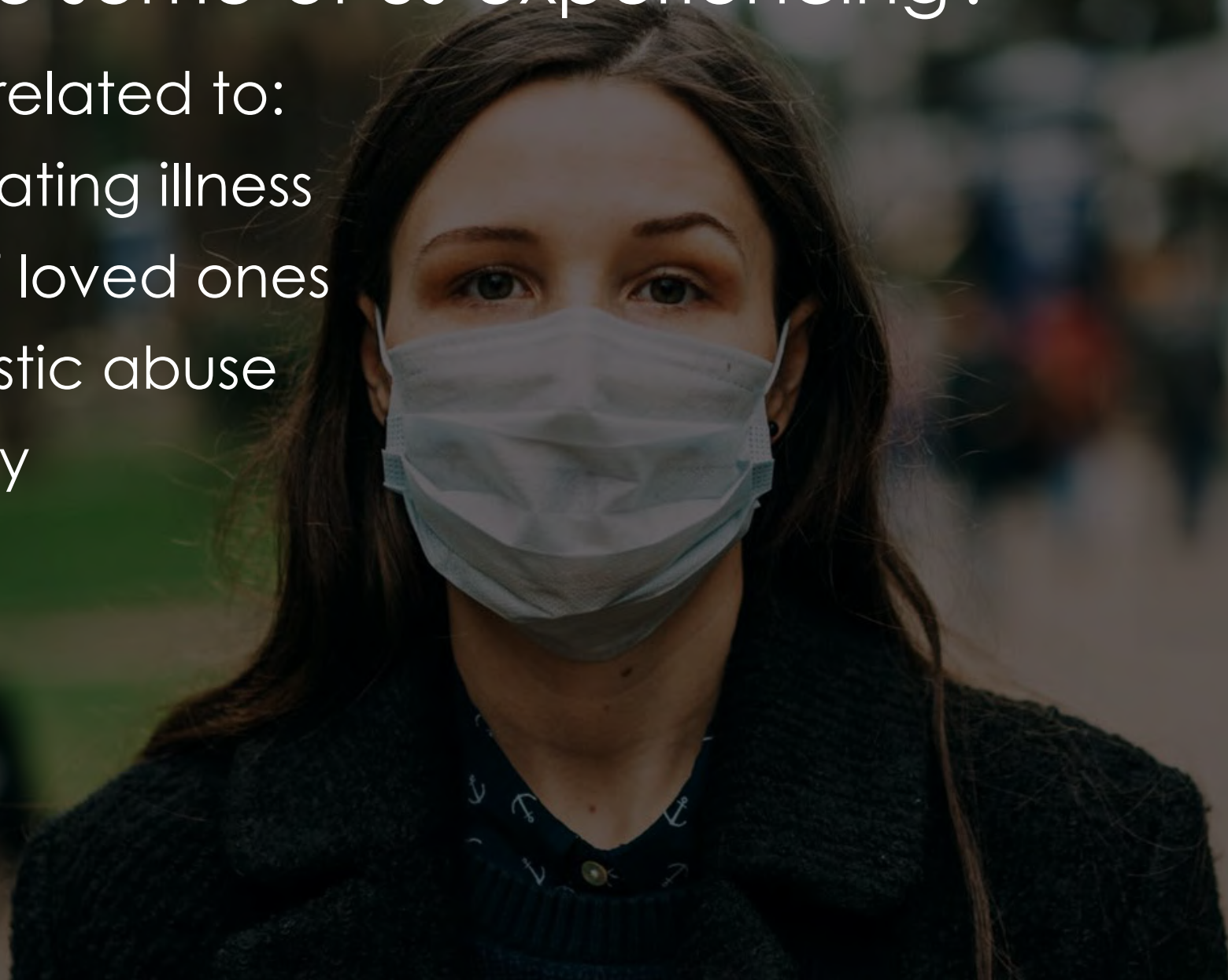
- ▶ Physical safety
- ▶ Economic security
- ▶ New work demands
- ▶ Social unease and isolation
- ▶ Domestic relationship strain
- ▶ Societal, political, and racial tensions
- ▶ Global news and impacts



# What are some of us experiencing?

**Trauma** related to:

- ▶ Debilitating illness
- ▶ Loss of loved ones
- ▶ Domestic abuse
- ▶ Poverty
- ▶ Other





Consider one individual's story...

## Trauma-informed Principles: Identify the Needs

- ▶ **Safety:** Physical and Emotional – is the environment safe, accessible, and welcoming?
- ▶ **Trustworthiness** – are goals and related procedures clear, communicated, and consistent?
- ▶ **Choice and Control** – do learners know their options, have choice whenever possible, and experience logical consequences for choices?
- ▶ **Collaboration** – are learners invited to contribute meaningfully regarding their own learning goals and program design as a whole?
- ▶ **Empowerment** – are learners' strengths recognized, and do instructors convey genuine optimism in their ability to continuously grow and meet goals?

# Instructional Considerations

Concrete practices that promote:

- ▶ Creating attachment
- ▶ Dealing with distress
- ▶ Building self-worth
- ▶ Calm transitions
- ▶ Emotional regulation
- ▶ Promoting executive functioning skills
- ▶ Resourcefulness and flexibility



# Strategies - Well-being of Staff

Instructors can:

- ▶ Practice self-compassion. Take time to check in with yourself to gain insight into any areas where you may be struggling. Once you identify the issues, create a plan to address the issues you can control and work on letting go of the ones you cannot.
- ▶ Utilize social supports as needed. Consider planning a virtual coffee break or lunch hour with colleagues or other educators. During these sessions, you might share strategies that are or are not working and experience a much-needed sense of community.
- ▶ Create a routine that includes getting up at a regular time, then getting ready and dressed for the day, and following a work schedule. Incorporate into your day some physical movement, as well as some breaks to connect with others.
- ▶ Be safe and follow the latest public health recommendations related to hygiene and protective equipment if you must go to the school or into the community for teaching supplies.

# Strategies - Well-being of Staff

Administrators can:

- ▶ Prioritize the physical safety of the entire school community when making decisions related to re-opening the school or holding any in-person events.
- ▶ Ensure the physical safety of all of your staff by following the latest public health recommendations related to hygiene and protective equipment, minimizing exposure as much as possible.
- ▶ Check in with your staff both collectively and individually. Encourage them to take time during the school day to manage their stress and take care of themselves and their families.
- ▶ Identify and distribute resources for staff who may need additional screening, assessment, and/or treatment for stress, mental health issues, or secondary traumatic stress symptoms.
- ▶ Consider virtual professional development sessions that promote positive ways to cope with stress, and that help staff to understand the signs of secondary traumatic stress and the ways to prevent it.
- ▶ Validate your staff members' concerns about their students. Explain expectations around their roles as well as limits of their responsibilities, and what supportive methods and resources are available.
- ▶ Create opportunities for staff to connect, using professional development time to reflect and process.

*Adapted from National Child Traumatic Stress Network resources.*

# Strategies: Creating the Learning Environment

Instructors can:

- ▶ Establish a routine and maintain clear communication. Then, empathize with the difficulties resulting from routines that have already changed due to current events. Explain that there will likely be future changes to routines, and that you will communicate ahead of time when possible.
- ▶ Provide information in digestible amounts. Moving to remote learning can make assignments feel more overwhelming and daunting. Present directions in smaller bites when necessary and encourage students to ask clarifying questions.
- ▶ Encourage students to lead the way in sharing what is challenging about their current situations. You can do this by asking open-ended questions, such as “How is remote learning going?”
- ▶ Show appreciation for students’ efforts to complete assignments. Remember that students may be dealing with many different home life situations while trying to maintain their academics.
- ▶ Create, and utilize, relational rituals before checking on distance learning assignments with students. For example, students and educators can share one tough moment, one hopeful moment, or one new lesson they learned about themselves during the day.

# Strategies: Creating the Learning Environment

Administrators can:

- ▶ Encourage teachers and staff to focus on social and emotional learning practices in addition to setting academic expectations.
- ▶ Share community resources with teachers that support family well-being (e.g., food and housing) and encourage them to share concerns about families with administration.
- ▶ Develop and share pandemic plans (now and future) with teachers; create a plan to share with the entire school community upon return to face-to-face learning.
- ▶ Allow space for reflecting on what teachers/staff have learned about their students from seeing their home lives during virtual learning sessions. (Maintain privacy and anonymity.)

# Strategies: Identifying Individual Concerns

Instructors can:

- ▶ Use existing knowledge of your students to be aware of who may be at greater risk, and find opportunities for short, individual check-ins to see how they are doing.
- ▶ Consider doing an activity such as a reflective circle, to provide an opportunity for students to share their feelings about the crisis.
- ▶ Note any changes in students' behavior. For example, is a student acting more tired or listless than normal, or having more difficulty concentrating? Is a student who is usually relatively focused now unable to stay with one train of thought? Does a normally social student seem more withdrawn? These may be normal reactions to the change in environment and the current circumstances, or they may warrant further assessment by a mental health professional.

# Strategies: Identifying Individual Concerns

Administrators can:

- ▶ Consider working with mental health and/or community partners with expertise in trauma to explore ways to identify students who may be experiencing mental health and trauma symptoms associated with the COVID-19.
- ▶ In your regular communication with students, it may be useful to normalize the stress and mention ways that mental health professionals can help.
- ▶ Ensure that all staff have been trained to identify reactions of trauma and mental health and know the procedures for linking a student to additional supports.



# Strategies: Addressing Individual Concerns

Instructors can:

- ▶ Set up individual conferences via computer or phone to check in with students and ask about their safety and worries.
- ▶ Talk with the mental health professionals to better understand how to connect students with them when necessary. Ask for consultation about any worries you may have about any particular student.

# Strategies: Addressing Individual Concerns

Administrators can:

- ▶ Work with mental health staff to develop a list of mental health resources that students can access from their homes. This list should include a suicide hotline, disaster distress hotline, domestic violence hotline, school mental health staff available by phone or video, and community mental health resources.
- ▶ Consider offering a virtual professional development in-service that includes some strategies that educators and staff can use to identify and connect to students who appear to be struggling during this time. Ensure that staff understand how a family can access the available resources.
- ▶ Develop a partnership with a local mental health agency with some expertise in trauma. People from this agency could offer professional development related to trauma and mental health, be available to students and staff who may need additional support and help navigate difficult decisions related to issues such as child abuse reporting or suicide assessments.
- ▶ Establish routine virtual “hallway check-ins” where staff can check-in with other staff related to student concerns.

# Strategies: Trauma Education and Awareness

Educators can:

- ▶ Reach out, provide space, and encourage students to connect with a professional privately if they have concerns.
- ▶ Greet students by name and create a virtual routine to greet the group.
- ▶ Teach about other historical times of crisis, including how communities rebounded.
- ▶ Encourage students to get fresh air and to move when possible.
- ▶ Share some of the many stories of hope and helping that have come out of this crisis.
- ▶ Share a positive affirmation or a student's strength—it can go a long way right now.
- ▶ Let students know that people find help in different ways and encourage students to discuss things that bring them hope.
- ▶ Engage students in creating rituals and celebrations for achieving their goals.

# Strategies: Trauma Education and Awareness

Administrators can:

- ▶ Utilize community partnerships and enlist the services of telecommunication companies to help ensure that all students have access to the internet and to a device where they can connect to their classroom.
- ▶ Communicate the importance of safety, connectedness, and hope to the educators, staff, and families, and share strategies they can employ to strengthen these areas.
- ▶ Consider these three areas for staff and allow opportunities for them to suggest ways to increase their own sense of safety, connectedness, and hope.
- ▶ Consider hosting staff meet-ups or coffee breaks and supporting ways for different groups of staff and educators to meet in small groups.
- ▶ Provide opportunities for staff to share gratitude about others, their experiences at home, or any other relevant experiences that may spark hope in others.
- ▶ Engage teachers, staff, and community members in planning for the future, including returning to school in the fall and commemorating milestones such as graduations.

*Adapted from National Child Traumatic Stress Network resources.*





# Cultural Responsiveness: Instructors

- ▶ Best Practice: **Learn what your students feel is most stressful and most helpful** during the crisis by inviting them to share how their families and communities are dealing with the crisis.

Blind Spot: Don't assume student behavior during the crisis reflects how they feel about the class materials or themselves. This may miss how their behaviors are affected by stress and sources of help that are connected to their family or community.

- ▶ Best Practice: **Believe students' stories** about family members and others in their community who did not receive hospital services or who have minimal access to technology to engage in school. Communicate empathy and concern when these stories are shared.

Blind Spot: Avoid minimizing students' experience by trying to convince them that they are misreading the situation. Also, avoid encouraging them to focus only on the positive; instead, acknowledge inequities or biases that may exist for their families or communities.

- ▶ Best Practice: **Actively seek out resilient behavior** from students and reframe cultural responses to stress in an attempt to understand how it serves a purpose for managing crises or thriving after crises.

Blind Spot: Avoid assumptions that responses to stress can only happen one way. Do not assume, when the student is not responding in the way that you feel is best, that their response is wrong.



# Cultural Responsiveness: Administrators

- ▶ Best Practice: **Provide support and guidance for staff** to engage conversations about how race, gender, socio-economic status and other important identities are sources of both stress and strength for students and staff.

Blind Spot: Avoid dissuading staff from receiving consultation about topics related to social identity because of fears that this might lead to staff or administration discomfort. Actively share with staff how these experiences may impact students and their families.

- ▶ Best Practice: Encourage staff to ask colleagues, students, and their families how to **make the virtual classroom more welcoming** to students during the crisis.

Blind Spot: Avoid creating a virtual workplace environment for staff that promotes assumptions about students' experiences without checking in to see whether the classroom environment is helping students feel safer and more trusting of the program.

- ▶ Best Practice: **Actively seek to address inequities** experienced by students of color by encouraging staff to act as advocates for students' needs and to become particularly attuned to the most vulnerable student needs.

Blind Spot: Resist the desire to "treat all students the same." Different students have different needs and when we don't acknowledge these unique needs, we risk more significant harm to our most vulnerable students.

# Keeping expectations realistic...

**“I will say that COVID has changed everything.** There were a lot of practices already in place that would be considered trauma informed.

Prior to COVID we were assessing what was in place and what there were plans for in terms of student support and faculty/staff development and looking at what data we wanted to collect.

With COVID, we still have practices in place and have added some that are trauma informed, but we are not using that label. **We are doing it because we feel it is the right practice for what we are seeing.**

With COVID nobody has the bandwidth right now to collect and assess data.

Discussion on campus is now that we have been in the COVID reality for close to a year; how do we help all (students, faculty, staff) work through the emotions (fear, change, exhaustion) that are part of daily life and how do we support the staff that are on the front lines?

**We are seeing signs of students being "over" the semester and we are only 4 weeks into it.**

Again, all of this is part of trauma informed practice/care, but we are not using that terminology.”

(A Community College Associate Dean of Student Success)

Trauma-  
aware  
instructors  
and  
administrators  
can:



Care



Be aware



Be flexible



Point to resources

# Secondary Traumatic Stress

The emotional distress caused by hearing about the firsthand traumatic experiences of another person. May experience symptoms similar to those who experienced trauma.

# Self-Care During a Pandemic

- ▶ **Stay connected with people.** Get creative, use technology as possible.
- ▶ **Remember the basics.** Get enough sleep, eat well, and exercise. This helps the brain to cope, regulate stress, decrease depression and anxiety, and process information.
- ▶ **Create a coping toolkit.** Put together a list or kit of activities and objects that help you feel grounded, safe, and joyful, and increase your quality of life.
- ▶ **Be intentional about exposure to media.** Exposure to trauma-filled media has been linked with increases in vicarious traumatization and traumatic stress symptoms.
- ▶ **Obtain mental health services if needed.** Multiple providers offer online counseling services or 24/7 crisis lines. These resources are for anyone, including you!
- ▶ **Normalize your struggles.** Remember that you are not alone in this. Understand that we all are adjusting. Be kind to yourself and others.



Dignity.  
Connection.  
Resilience.



A person's hand is holding a white smartphone. The screen shows a video call with a woman who has red hair and is wearing glasses. The background of the slide is a blurred image of a person's face, with a dark overlay and a pink rectangular shape in the top right corner.

Resource:

1-800-662-HELP(4357)

SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration) provides local treatment information, support groups, community services, free publications.



