Trauma, Covid-19, and the College Classroom

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Why become trauma-aware?
A trauma-aware classroom is a more equitable classroom.
Today’s Objectives

1. Deepen understanding of adverse experiences and resulting trauma as contributors to students’ neurodiversity.

2. Consider trauma in the context of pandemic, economic hardship, and societal tensions.

3. Examine the impact of trauma on learning and adopt a trauma-informed instructional approach.
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.
Individual trauma responses vary due to:

- Development
- Temperament
- Perception
- Trauma History
- Post-Trauma Events
- Support Systems
Types of Trauma

- Acute Trauma -
  Results from a single, sudden, usually unexpected event

- Chronic Trauma -
  Results from long-standing, repeated events, such as abuse

- Complex Trauma –
  Describes exposure to multiple traumatic events from an early age and the effects of these experiences over the course of development.

- Historical Trauma –
  Describes the cumulative impact of group trauma over generations
Trauma Occurring on College Campuses

- Sexual assault – 20% women, 4% men are sexually assaulted while in college (but this is vastly underreported)
- Alcohol related illness and accidents
- Mass violence/shootings
Trauma Occurring on College Campuses

- Covid-19 related illness
- Covid-19 related economic hardship
- Covid-19 related isolation
What are we experiencing right now?

**Unprecedented levels** of stress and trauma related to:

- Physical safety/well-being
- Economic security
- New work demands
- Social unease and isolation
- Domestic relationship strain
- Societal, political, and racial tensions
- Global news and impacts
What else might we be experiencing?
What else might we be experiencing?

The neurological impacts of trauma.
Trauma is a brain issue and therefore, a learning issue.
The emotional brain continues to sound the alarm and react:

- **Fight** responses: yelling, swearing, posturing, aggressive behavior;
- **Flight** responses: running away, refusing to talk, avoidance, substance use;
- **Freeze** responses: spacing out; appearing numb, disconnected, confused, or unresponsive.
- **Faun** responses: an urgent need to please to avoid conflict.
Trigger Responses

Reminders of past traumatic experiences that automatically cause the body to react as if the traumatic event is happening again in that moment.

Responses can appear confusing and out of place and be misunderstood by others.
Indicators of Traumatic Response

Hyperarousal
- Trouble managing your emotions
- Feeling more agitated and irritable
- Getting angry with others more quickly
- Overreacting to smaller issues
- Panic buying
- Obsessively watching the news
- Trouble relaxing
- Difficulty sleeping
- Increased use of substances

Hypoarousal
- Feeling emotionally disconnected from your loved ones and your work
- Physically withdrawing
- Difficulty getting out of bed or doing daily activities
- Feeling foggy or numb
- Frequently spacing out
- Feeling depressed
- Changes in appetite and/or sleep
Emotional
- Irritability, sadness, anxiety, depression, guilt, grief, fear, apathy/numbing, agitation, anger

Behavioral
- Withdrawal, aggression, increased conflict, crying frequently, excessive worry, difficulty communicating or listening, blaming other people for everything, changes in energy levels, regressed behaviors (children), increased risk-taking (e.g. substance use), decline in school/job performance

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

Cognitive
- Confusion, difficulty concentrating, forgetfulness, racing thoughts, preoccupation with the event (e.g. intrusive thoughts/memories, trouble thinking clearly)
Trauma’s Impact on Learning

- Difficulty processing information and language
- Difficulty regulating emotions, attention, and behavior
- Difficulty forming trusting relationships with adults and peers
Pause to consider:

- How might trauma response behaviors be misinterpreted in your classroom(s)?
- How might “regular” learning experiences impact a learner dealing with trauma or even trigger additional trauma?
Resilience

A positive, adaptive response to significant adversity. Educators can play a key role!

- Adaptable, caring, and supportive relationships
- A sense of mastery over life circumstances
- Strong executive function and self-regulation skills
- Safe, supportive environments (schools, communities)
- Affirming faith and/or cultural traditions
Resilience

The capacity to positively adapt to adversity.

- Not all or nothing, but rather a process
- Many factors influence
- Can vary by situation
- Can be supported at any age
- Is intrapersonal (thoughts, feelings, responses) and interpersonal (relationships)
A Trauma-Informed Approach

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

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

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

Seeks to actively resist retraumatization.
Instructional Considerations

Concrete practices that promote:
- Creating attachment
- Dealing with distress
- Building self-worth
- Calm transitions
- Emotional regulation
- Promoting executive functioning skills
Trauma-informed instructors 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.
Dimensions of Self-Care
Instead of asking:
Why is this person acting this way?

A trauma-informed lens moves us to:
How has this person’s experiences impacted them and how they best learn?