ETR Virtual Vitality
Adapting Trauma-Informed Practices to a Virtual Environment

design 4 learning

Whether we are educators, caregivers, or young people—we are all processing significant disruptions in our lives. When we experience stressful events, we release hormones that activate our fight, flight, or freeze stress response. Sometimes this stress can motivate us to meet the demands of a challenge; at other times it can negatively impact our mental and/or physical health and behavior.[1]

For some young people, exposure to stressful events, like the absence of routines, economic hardship, or the serious illness of a family member, can be traumatic. Young people who have been exposed to other adverse childhood experiences (e.g., experiencing violence, abuse, neglect, or substance use in the home) particularly in the absence of positive experiences (e.g., presence of caring adults, sense of belonging at school) may struggle even more during stressful life events.[2] Understanding and recognizing the effects of stress and trauma allows us to respond more compassionately and effectively.

In recent years, many schools and educators have adopted trauma-informed practices in response to well-established science that shows how trauma and adversity can negatively impact student academic success.[3] Trauma-informed practices involve recognizing the signs and symptoms of trauma and responding in ways that minimize harm and promote well-being for youth and adults alike. Rather than interpreting challenging behaviors as problems, a trauma-informed lens recognizes such behaviors as symptoms of unmet underlying needs; this, in turn, allows for addressing those needs by reviewing and adpating policies, procedures, and practices.

As schools adapt to more virtual instruction, trauma-informed practices can adapt as well. Below are some tips for educators to translate these practices into a virtual world. The guidance in this tool is rooted in the science of what we know about how trauma impacts learning followed by recommended practices from leading experts (see additional resources at the end of the this document.)

Take Care of Yourself and Other Educators

Educators are not immune to stressors. It is easy to feel overwhelmed managing disruptions in your personal life, adapting to virtual instruction, and simultaneously caring for your students. Do what you can to fill your own cup so that you can sustain your presence and care for others over time. Lean on and support one another. Your physical, mental and emotional well-being is an important ingredient for promoting the well-being of your students. Love and compassion are contagious.

Promote Safety and Emotional Regulation

Stress and trauma undermine our sense of safety and predictability. Educators must prioritize physical, emotional, and social safety and predictability so that students are able to focus on thinking and learning rather than managing threats to their well-being.

+ **Establish and maintain predictable virtual routines.** During times of uncertainty, routines and structure are especially important to establish safety and to help students self-regulate.

  - Adapt prior in-person routines to a virtual setting (e.g., morning announcements can be done in a video emailed to all students).

  - Post a virtual weekly and daily agenda.

  - Provide regular opening and closing activities during virtual gatherings (e.g., share something positive in their day–students can enter responses into a chat box).

+ **Set clear behavioral expectations but allow for flexibility.**

  - Virtual modes of communication, times, and activities may not work for every student. Solicit input and feedback from students and families to learn what is most effective for them.

  - For virtual classes, establish group agreements for your time together, just as you would in an in-person classroom. Invite student participation by brainstorming group agreements on a virtual white board and asking all students to mark their initials. Remind students of their agreements at the start of each session.

+ **Make instructions easily digestible.** Stress and trauma can leave us feeling overwhelmed with limited cognitive capacity for understanding complex instructions, or changes in routines. Break down written and verbal instructions into smaller bits, using clear and simple language. Use images and minimize the number of words on a slide or screen.[4]

+ **Integrate emotional regulation strategies like mindful breathing, drumming, dancing, or other movement throughout virtual classes.** Start each virtual session with an activity to help regulate student emotions, excitement, or stress. Frequently model and integrate emotional regulation techniques throughout the class.

+ **Pay attention to changes in mood or behavior.** When students are stressed or experiencing a trauma reaction, they may have a hard time managing their impulses, paying attention or focusing. They may be more emotional or irritable, or they may become more withdrawn. These changes may be more noticeable in person, so it is important to create opportunities that give you insight into a student's experience when working remotely.

  - For quick check-ins or to read the pulse of the group, use chat features to share an emoji or a thumbs up/thumbs sideways to match their mood.

  - Provide opportunities for students to name and process their emotions. Use writing assignments, virtual small group discussions, or individual check-ins.

  - Ask open-ended questions that allow students to share their insights and experience. Examples include: How are you feeling today? What do you like most about learning from home? What is most challenging for you? Give students the option to share with you, their peers, or parents.

+ **Validate and normalize the range of student emotions and experiences.** You can help students regulate their stress response by staying calm, listening to and validating student experiences when they are in need (e.g., I see that you are frustrated... I understand that you are worried...).

+ **Create a virtual wellness room where students can go when they feel stressed.** This might look like a website with links to mindfulness or movement activities, webcams of nature, positive messages from school staff, and information about where to get additional support.

Cultivate Supportive Relationships and Connection

Safe and supportive relationships are important for building resilience. Our ability to form trusting and compassionate relationships with students is essential for helping them feel safe, cared for, and connected.[4]

+ **Establish and maintain positive and responsive relationships with every student.** Even brief interactions signals to your students that you care about them.

  - Set up frequent video or phone check-ins with individual or small groups of students.

  - Use video, when possible, to enhance the sense of connection.

  - Greet students by name when they log on to a virtual classroom.

  - Give a virtual high five or hug.

  - Send personal notes of care via text or chat.

+ **Make sure virtual communication conveys warmth (via words, videos, and/or emojis).** Emails, texts, or even online instruction can often come across as impersonal in the absence of tone of voice and body language. Trauma-impacted students may be more likely to misinterpret impersonal or emotionally neutral communication as negative. Pay extra attention to the "tone" of virtual communication when these other social cues are unavailable to students or more difficult to read.

+ **Create opportunities for students to meaningfully connect and nurture their relationships with each other.** Utilize small group breakout discussions, offline group assignments, virtual field trips with an assigned "chat buddy," or sharing notes of appreciation about their peers.

Foster Hope and Resilience

In addition to strategies above, we can also build student resilience by enhancing their personal agency, instilling a sense of hope, and nurturing their well-being.[4, 5]

+ **Give students choices to help them experience more control over their lives.**

  - Ask students what routines work best for them and what supports they need.

  - Provide options for homework assignments, including low- and high-tech alternatives.

  - Ask students to share their own ideas about how to connect virtually.

+ **Make assignments meaningful by exploring stories of hope and resilience.**

  - Interview elders or other mentors who lived through challenging life events.

  - Ask students to reflect on the personal, familial, and cultural strengths and resources that get them through tough times.

+ **Encourage altruism and gratitude.** Acts of kindness and gratitude can light up pleasure centers of the brain that make us feel good!

  - Ask students to write about or share how they see people helping each other.

  - Assign projects that encourage students to be "helpers," and let them choose a project based on a need that they identify.

  - Express gratitude for student effort to overcome whatever obstacles they face. Encourage students to express gratitude for each other.

+ **Notice and celebrate student effort, successes, and resilience**—no matter how small.

Remember

+ Trauma-informed practices are applied universally; they do not require us to know someone's trauma history.

+ Not all students respond to the same stressors in the same way. Positive experiences, relationships, and resources can buffer the negative impacts of stress.

+ Students will remember how you made them feel. Prioritize student well-being as much as their assignments. If students feel safe and cared for, they will remember what you taught them.

+ Healing and well-being are always possible.

Additional Resources

+ Colorado Department of Education. Well-being and Connection During COVID-19. Available at: **Well-being and Connection During COVID-19**

+ Halladay Goldman, J., Danna, L., Maze, J. W., Pickens, I. B., and Ake III, G. S. (2020). Trauma-Informed School Strategies during COVID-19. Los Angeles, CA, and Durham, NC: National Center for Child Traumatic Stress. Available at: **Trauma-Informed School Strategies During Covid-19**

+ Minahan, J. (2020). A New Reality: Getting Remote Learning Right. An Educational Leadership Report. 77: 22-27. Available at: **Maintaining Connections, Reducing Anxiety While School Is Closed**

+ Newhouse, K. (2020). Four Core Priorities for Trauma-Informed Distance Learning. KQED. Available at: **Four Core Priorities for Trauma-Informed Distance Learning**

+ Teaching Tolerance. (2020). A Trauma-Informed Approach to Teaching Through Coronavirus. Available at: **A Trauma-Informed Approach to Teaching Through Coronavirus**

+ Trauma and Learning Policy Institute. (2020). Priority for Trauma-Sensitive Remote Learning: Keeping Connections Strong. Available at: **Priority for Trauma-Sensitive Remote Learning: Keeping Connections Strong**

References

1. Shonkoff, J.P., et al. (2012). The Lifelong Effects of Early Childhood Adversity and Toxic Stress. Pediatrics, 129 (1) e232-e246; DOI: https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2011-2663

2. Bethell, C., et al. (2019). Positive Childhood Experiences and Adult Mental and Relational Health in a Statewide Sample: Associations Across Adverse Childhood Experiences Levels. JAMA Pediatrics, 173(11):e193007. doi:10.1001/jamapediatrics.2019.3007

3. Maynard, B. R., et al. (2019). Effects of trauma-informed approaches in schools: A systematic review. Systematic Reviews, DOI: 10.1002/cl2.1018

4. Dorado, J., et al. (2016). Healthy Environments and Response to Trauma in Schools (HEARTS): A whole-school, multi-level, prevention and intervention program from creating trauma-informed, safe and supportive schools. School Mental Health. 8:163-176.

5. Ginwright, S. A. (2016). Hope and healing in urban education: How urban activists and teachers are reclaiming matters of the heart. New York, NY: Routledge.