Center for Teaching and Learning
UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

Trauma-Informed Teaching

Trauma can take many shapes and forms, it can impact different individuals in many different ways, and it can last from a single instant to many years. It can be related to events in an individual's personal life (e.g., bad relationship, death of a loved one, car accident, and so on), or it can be a result of an event or situation that affects a large group of people (e.g., 9/11, COVID-19, campus shooting, student suicide, etc.).

Whatever the specific situation, we know that trauma can have significant and lasting impact on an individual, and that impact can affect their ability to learn – both in the immediate term and for a long time afterwards. This impact is due quite simply to ways in which a person's brain is shaped and trained in response to trauma. With this in mind, it is useful to consider ways in which we can engage in our teaching through a *trauma-informed* lens.

CONTENTS

WHAT IS TRAUMA?

> *Individual trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.*
> *Substance Abuse & Mental Health Service Administration (SAMHSA), 2014*

KEY FEATURES OF TRAUMA

A. Trauma results from harmful events or circumstances

Whether caused by a single event or ongoing stressful circumstances, trauma involves exposure to something that causes physical or emotional harm, or the threat of such harm.

- Traumatic events can include physical or sexual abuse, experiencing or witnessing violence or an assault, neglect or abandonment, the death of someone close, a serious illness, injury, accident, natural disaster, or military combat.
- Circumstances marked by chronic stress can also result in trauma. For example, poverty, housing instability, food insecurity, parental separation, living with someone who has a mental illness or engages in substance abuse, or living through a global pandemic can all create conditions that meet the definition of trauma.
- Trauma can also affect families, communities, and groups in a collective way. Historical trauma is the "cumulative emotional and psychological wounding, over the lifespan and across generations, emanating from massive group trauma experiences" (Brave Heart, 2003). African Americans experience the shared "multigenerational history of slavery, race-based segregation, racism, prejudice, and discrimination" (Williams-Washington & Mills, 2018). Native Americans and descendants of Holocaust survivors are groups that are also affected by historical trauma.

B. Individual experiences determine whether an event or circumstance is traumatic for that individual

Individuals experience potentially traumatic events and circumstances differently, meaning that what is traumatic for one person may not be traumatic for someone else. For example, how survivors understand the meaning of the events, the level of disruption they experience as a result, and the support systems they are able to access can all impact whether or not a specific situation functions as a trauma for an individual.

C. Trauma has long-lasting adverse effects on an individual's well-being and daily life

Traumatic experiences interrupt and interfere with regular activities, relationships, and emotions. Everyday activities and interactions may become very difficult in the aftermath of trauma. Even when traumatic events or circumstances are no longer occurring, survivors still put a lot of time and energy into maintaining their daily routines and responsibilities. Trauma changes cognitive processes and functions, which impacts survivors mentally and physically. Their bodies and minds may continue to respond as if the traumatic event were ongoing. This can have a lasting impact on health, resulting in chronic disease or mental health challenges.

WHY ADOPT A TRAUMA-INFORMED APPROACH?

When an individual experiences trauma, their body's fight, flight, or freeze response is typically activated. The emotional response center of the brain is often compromised, leading to difficulty dealing with negative input (e.g., a bad grade) or changing circumstances (e.g., adjusted due dates). In addition, the part of the brain responsible for abstract thinking, language, and decision-making often goes offline. This makes it very difficult to process complex new information – which is of course exactly what is needed in most college classes.

THE PREVALENCE OF TRAUMA AMONG STUDENTS

- 66% of first-year students have experienced a traumatic life event (Read et al,, 2011)
- 62% of adults experience at least one potentially traumatic event before they turn 18 (CDC, 2019)
- College students experience an average of 6 potentially traumatic events over four years of study (Lalande & Bonanno, 2011)
- Women and students of lower socioeconomic status experience higher rates of trauma exposure (Read et al., 2011)
- Nearly 26% of young adults live with a mental illness, and nearly 75% of mental illnesses in adults onset by the age of 25 (Oswalt et al., 2020)
- Anxiety and depression are common and increasing in prevalence among college students. Rates of anxiety increased from 9% to nearly 15% from 2009 to 2015, and depression from 9% to just over 12% (Oswalt et al., 2020)

These effects can arise when a trauma is first experienced, for several days, weeks, or months after the fact, when memories of traumatic events are triggered, and so on. As a result, students who would otherwise succeed in their coursework can end up struggling and falling behind, often without the instructor understanding why.

A trauma-informed approach to teaching takes the impact and prevalence of traumatic experiences into account. By attending to the needs of your students you can create an environment conducive to learning for all students, thereby increasing your instructional effectiveness while positively impacting the minds and lives of your students.

STRATEGIES FOR TRAUMA-INFORMED TEACHING

Continue reading for more on each of the following strategies:

1. Create consistency & routine with room for flexibility
2. Be transparent about your goals and expectations
3. Manage the risk of in-class triggers
4. Provide students opportunities to use their voice and exercise choice
5. Intentionally articulate interest in your students' well-being
6. Build trust through the instructor-student relationship
7. Engage students in meaningful interactions with their peers
8. Nurture a "growth mindset" in students
9. Create a sense of physical safety in your physical space
10. Take care of yourself

1. CREATE CONSISTENCY & ROUTINE WITH ROOM FOR FLEXIBILITY

Knowing what to expect in a specific context (e.g., in your class) helps all students' brains remain engaged with their reasoning and emotional centers – thereby helping them to engage productively and effectively. Built-in consistency and routine also help to reduce the chance that a students' trauma-responses will be triggered due to a need to be able to predict what will happen next and/or to navigate unexpected surprises along the way.

As a complement to routine and consistency, students who are in crisis or have experienced trauma will benefit from flexible options that are integrated into the design of a course – thus allowing them to continue successfully with their coursework without the added burden of asking for exceptions and/or disclosing personal details.

Strategies for Establishing Consistency & Routine

- ❑ Provide students with an outline, agenda, or set of learning outcomes at the beginning of each class session.
- ❑ Begin and end each session with a similar activity.
- ❑ Be explicit about changes to routine (e.g., "Today we will be doing things a little differently.") and give advanced notice of major changes.
- ❑ Format similar activities in similar ways.
- ❑ Where possible, use consistent grading criteria (and communicate those criteria in advance).
- ❑ Provide timely feedback.
- ❑ Communicate with students about their progress at regular intervals.
- ❑ Be clear about your expectations for students and maintain them throughout the course.

Strategies for Integrating Flexibility

- ❑ Allow students to miss a certain number of classes without a grade penalty and without explanation.
- ❑ Establish a set number of non-penalized 'late submission' opportunities, where no explanation is needed.
- ❑ Create a clear mechanism for requesting extensions and/or re-submission opportunities, in the face of extenuating circumstances. Provide guidance on what might count as an extenuating circumstance.
- ❑ Adjust your lesson plan or modify your course schedule in the event of a significant event on campus or in the surrounding community (see our resource on Responding to Campus Tragedy for more suggestions on this topic).

2. BE TRANSPARENT ABOUT YOUR GOALS AND EXPECTATIONS

All students will benefit from clear and transparent communication about your goals and expectations. For students who have experienced trauma, transparency in your approach will also help to establish a greater sense of mental or emotional security – which in turn allows them to take more risks in their learning, face challenges with greater self-confidence, and engage productively with failure. In other words, being transparent about your goals and expectations will increase the likelihood of academic success for all students, and particularly so for students who have experienced trauma.

Strategies for Increasing Transparency

- ❑ State your course goals and learning objectives both clearly and openly.
- ❑ Explain how your course's goals & learning objectives may contribute benefit to your students outside the immediate context of your specific class.
- ❑ Connect class activities and assignments to larger course goals and objectives.
- ❑ For all class activities and assignments, aim to explain to students what they will be doing, how they should go about doing it, and why they are being asked to do it.
- ❑ Provide students with information about why you have designed the course the way it is designed, and/or why you approach teaching specific topics the way you do. Where possible, connect your comments specifically to your overall goal for their success.
- ❑ Explain the reasoning and rationale behind your various course policies.
- ❑ Provide information about your general expectations for typical class behaviors (e.g., Can they step out of the room without asking? What happens if they are late to class? Can they bring food to class?). Consider working together with students to co-create classroom norms.
- ❑ As appropriate and insofar as you are comfortable, increase your own personal transparency, similar to what you might expect from students if they need to miss a class or are behind on their coursework.

3. MANAGE THE RISK & IMPACT OF IN-CLASS TRIGGERS

Through an experience of trauma, an individual's brain learns to respond to specific types of input in specific ways, in order to preserve their safety through what their brain perceives as incoming danger. As a result, their survival instincts and stress responses – which have themselves been shaped by trauma – may be triggered by specific situations that would not be an issue for individuals who have not been impacted by trauma in the same way. Even individuals who have experienced the same traumatic events may develop different triggers and responses.

Your goal is not to protect students from difficult subject matter, or even to anticipate every situation that might give rise to a negative experience by a student. Instead, the goal is to create an environment where the risks and impact are mitigated, and where students are less likely to be forced into situations that may be detrimental to their mental health and well-being.

Strategies for Managing the Impact of Triggers

- ❑ Provide advance information about potentially difficult topics that will be discussed or considered in a class.
- ❑ Provide alternative options for students who may find engaging in a particular topic specifically triggering. Allow them to take those options without providing you with any specific justification for their choice.
- ❑ Provide students with multiple options for assignment topics, so that they can (when appropriate in the context of your course) avoid topics or content that may be damaging to their well-being.
- ❑ Create a course policy that makes it clear to students that they are welcome to step out of your class meeting space temporarily if they need a break or some other escape.
- ❑ Remind students about available campus resources.
- ❑ Explicitly acknowledge when something has happened in the context of your class that may have had a negative impact on students coming from specific backgrounds or experiences. Share your perspective with your students and consider inviting them to share their perspectives as well (provided you don't think it will do further damage!).
- ❑ Pursue lines of questioning to help students identify useful and appropriate ways to articulate their views.
- ❑ Contact UGA's Equal Opportunity Office to discuss problematic interactions involving potential harassment or discrimination.

4. PROVIDE STUDENTS OPPORTUNITIES TO USE THEIR VOICE AND EXERCISE CHOICE

When we give students choice, we affirm the value and importance of their preferences, and empower them to take control of (and responsibility for) their own learning. In addition, traumatic experiences often involve a loss of agency, choice, and control – so providing students with opportunity to exercise choice and agency can also help to increase the general sense of safety and security for students who have experienced trauma, and reduce the likelihood of a trauma- or stress-related response to their environment.

Strategies for Increasing Students' Sense of Agency & Control

- ❑ Allow students to choose between an array of engagement options in your course.
- ❑ Provide choice among several project topics or options.
- ❑ For an in-class activity, allow students to work individually, with a partner, or with a group.
- ❑ Incorporate peer feedback activities (e.g., students give each other feedback on drafts of papers).
- ❑ Ask your students for suggestions about adjustments to make in your course and/or ask for their perspective on the strengths of a specific assignment (and respond with changes or explanations that take their comments seriously).
- ❑ Provide opportunities for students to discuss their ideas – either with the whole class or in smaller groups.
- ❑ Engage the class in defining course expectations, co-creating a project or assessment, and/or identifying means for giving and receiving feedback on their work.

5. INTENTIONALLY ARTICULATE INTEREST IN YOUR STUDENTS' WELL-BEING

Students who have experienced trauma may have particular difficulty managing their stress and regulating their emotional responses. As stress levels increase – as often happens through the course of a semester – their difficulties may also increase. Communicating with students that you care about their well-being, and reminding them about ways they can and should engage in self-care, is a simple way to positively impact all students – and particularly those who are dealing with the negative effects of traumatic experiences.

Strategies for Contributing to Students' Well-being

- ❑ Include UGA's required Well-Being Resources statement in your syllabus, and mention it on the first day of class.
- ❑ Include comments in your syllabus and/or on the first day of class about the importance of mental health.
- ❑ Talk about student well-being during class time.
- ❑ As Spring Break approaches, remind your students to take care of themselves and reach out for help if they need it.
- ❑ As the middle or end of the semester approaches, remind students to eat, sleep, shower, and exercise – since those things will help them stay healthy.
- ❑ As Thanksgiving approaches, encourage students to take time for themselves and to prioritize their own sense of well-being over possible challenges with family.
- ❑ Incorporate brief well-being activities into your class (e.g., ask students to close their eyes and take several deep breaths, share moments of gratitude in partners, pause for a stand or stretch break, etc.).
- ❑ In times of collective hardship or loss, acknowledge the situation and commit to moving forward together. See our resource on Responding to Campus Tragedy for more suggestions on this topic.
- ❑ List campus resources in your syllabus and through course announcements, scheduled for key points during the semester.
- ❑ Reach out to check on students who seem to be struggling in (or absent from) your course. As them if there's anything they need, to help them succeed in the course, and follow-up with campus resources when warranted.

6. Build trust through the instructor-student relationship

We cannot generally expect instant trust from our students, but we can work toward creating a learning environment marked by a growing sense of trust and safety. Students who have experienced trauma may have a particularly difficult time trusting others or experiencing relationships in a positive way. They may also bring with them the effects of past experiences in which they felt they were failed or harmed by an adult authority figure. By working intentionally to build trust, we can help to decrease our students' levels of unproductive stress as they learn, and increase the likelihood that they will ask us for help with their coursework when needed.

Strategies for Building Trust

- ❑ Learn and use your students' preferred names.
- ❑ Listen actively to your students, giving them your full attention when they are speaking.
- ❑ When a student wants to ask a question or discuss a concern, pause what you are doing and make eye contact. If you have to hurry to another class or meeting, or if you think the conversation would be better to have during office hours, explain that to the student and set up a plan for when and how you will talk next.
- ❑ Ask your students about their interests, activities, and goals – and share your own (within the bounds of an appropriately professional relationship, of course!).
- ❑ Inject relevant personal information into your course interactions (e.g., use a personal photo related to the topic at hand, mention a national park you've visited, defend the superiority of hockey to every other professional sport, or tie in a movie you've recently seen).
- ❑ Talk about your motivations behind your work, teaching, and/or research.
- ❑ Make sure your students know how to reach you, and what they can expect in terms of response time. Where possible, provide both text-based and verbal options for connection.
- ❑ When talking with students about policies they may have violated or expectations they have failed to meet, intentionally adopt the perspective that they want to succeed and are doing as well as they can, given the circumstances. Ask them questions to help identify the barriers they are facing, and work with them to find solutions for the future.
- ❑ Provide honest feedback that also provides students with information about how to improve and succeed. Aim to create a sense of hope and motivation.
- ❑ Request feedback from students early in the semester, based on their experience in the course. Respond to their feedback with adjustments and explanations.

7. ENGAGE STUDENTS IN MEANINGFUL INTERACTIONS WITH THEIR PEERS

Students can benefit from their peers in multiple ways – both in the short term (e.g., their ability to succeed in a specific course) and the long term (e.g., building friendships and networks that will last beyond their college years). Unfortunately, some traumatic experiences can make it difficult for an individual establish, engage in, and/or maintain healthy relationships, thus decreasing their access to the benefits of peer relationships in a class. By intentionally providing opportunities for students to engage meaningfully with one another, we can help these students enjoy the benefits of student-to-student relationships, as well as the more general benefits of a healthy community dynamic.

Strategies for Building Peer Relationships

- ❑ Dedicate time during the first days and weeks of class for students to connect with each other in meaningful ways.
- ❑ Provide opportunities for students to share about their lives and interests during class.
- ❑ Invite students to share a video or discussion post to introduce themselves to others in the class. Consider framing the exercise with specific guidelines, like asking them to showcase a meaningful object or experience, share pictures of pets, or talk about their favorite food.
- ❑ Ask students to talk to each about what they are learning, during class.
- ❑ Begin pair and group activities with an introductory task that helps students get to know one another.
- ❑ Use a shared discussion board where students can ask questions about assignments, and encourage them to respond to each other's questions with helpful comments.
- ❑ Create opportunities for students to provide each other with feedback on their work.
- ❑ Incorporate cooperative and collaborative tasks that allow students to use their skills and learn from one another.
- ❑ Create a space in class or online that is social or fun. For example, you might include a weekly "share a meme with your neighbor" activity, or some other short and light-hearted engagement opportunity.
- ❑ Use self-enrollment groups in eLC to allow students to sign up for a study group.

8. Nurture a "growth mindset" in students

Students with a *growth mindset* tend to believe that their skills and knowledge will increase and develop as they put effort into their learning. They tend to engage with resilience and independence, and learn to see failure as an opportunity for growth.

In some cases, experiences with trauma can lead to a general sense of helplessness, which makes it difficult to exert effort in the face of challenge. Helping students adopt a growth mindset in your class can help keep them on track and positively impact their learning and success.

Strategies for Building Growth Mindset in Students

- ❑ Express belief in your students' potential for continued learning and development.
- ❑ Help students explore, identify, and apply their strengths. This could be through a formal strengths-identifying tool, or simply by providing them with reflection questions to consider in light of their engagement in your course.
- ❑ Provide feedback that emphasizes areas for growth rather than simply identifying incorrect responses (which is also sometimes necessary).
- ❑ Ask students to reflect on their own work and progress, thinking about their approach to work in the course, and how they might need to adjust their strategies to find success.
- ❑ Provide opportunities for students to improve their grades by responding to feedback and/or demonstrating increased proficiency with specific skills.
- ❑ Share information about how your own past failures and/or encounters with challenges helped you succeed in the long run.
- ❑ Highlight the long-term implications of the course goals and skills, such as how students might incorporate them in future careers or interpersonal relationships.
- ❑ Model a growth mindset by asking students for feedback on your teaching, and responding with adjustments aimed at improving their experience in your course.

9. Create a sense of physical safety in your physical space

For some students, the effects of trauma may be connected to a feeling of being unsafe in particular types of spaces. Providing information about your classroom and the surrounding area can help reduce this stress on their brains, thereby freeing up valuable cognitive resources to focus on learning.

Information that can Increase Students' Sense of Safety

- ❑ locations of entrances and exits to the building
- ❑ locations of nearby elevators and stairs
- ❑ locations of gender-neutral bathrooms and nearby water fountains
- ❑ how to communicate with you about their needs in terms of classroom accessibility – and your commitment to meeting those needs
- ❑ emergency procedures specific to your classroom (see the OEP's Classroom Preparedness Checklist)

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10. Take care of yourself

The emotional impact of teaching a population affected by trauma can lead to *compassion fatigue*. Compassion fatigue is a type of *secondary traumatic stress* (STS) that results from the demanding nature of encountering the traumatic experiences of others. With this in mind, it is important to attend to your own needs for support, compassion, and self-care.

Strategies for Self-Care

- ❑ Set aside specific times to engage with your students, allowing yourself to take time away from your teaching (e.g., tell your students that you will not reply to emails on Sundays).
- ❑ Adopt strategies (such as many described above) to contribute positively to your students' well-being without requiring major emotional effort from you.
- ❑ Talk with colleagues or friends about your frustrations. Let them know if you need help finding solutions, or if you just need someone to listen.
- ❑ Exercise, engage in hobbies, eat well, and spend time with friends/family.
- ❑ Reach out to those in your personal or professional networks for support.
- ❑ Reach out to the CTL to request a one-on-one consultation about your teaching.
- ❑ Seek support from mental health professionals, when needed.

Additional Resources

Crisis Resources

- Emergencies & After Hours Care, University Health Center
- National Alliance on Mental Illness, Georgia

Campus Resources for Students

General UGA Campus Resources

- Well-being Resources & Digital Well-being Resources
- Student Care & Outreach connects students with resources on campus.
- University Health Center offers resources and programming for student mental health and wellness.
- Financial Hardship resources
- Mentor Program

Tailored Resources

- Accessibility & Testing
- International Student Life
- Pride Center
- Multicultural Services and Programs
- Student Veterans Resource Center

See also the Office of Student Affairs for additional information, resources, programs, and relevant student organizations.

Campus Resources for Faculty

- UGA Employee Well-Being Resources
- UGA's Well-being Coordinator: wellbeing@uga.edu

Further Reading

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