

# A Strengths-Based Approach to Trauma in the Classroom

CHEP 2022

Iana Amiscaray

Graduate Assistant for Teaching & Learning

American University Center for Teaching, Research & Learning

# Learning Outcomes



REFLECT ON HOW WE ALREADY  
RECOGNIZE TRAUMA IN THE  
CLASSROOM




EMPLOY A TRAUMA-INFORMED  
EMPOWERMENT MODEL IN THE  
CLASSROOM USING STRENGTHS-  
BASED STRATEGIES



# Content Warning

We will be discussing topics and experiences of trauma during this session. If you feel overwhelmed or triggered at any point during the session, please feel free to step away or leave the session. Your well-being is our priority.





# Land Acknowledgement

*“Virginia Tech acknowledges that we live and work on the Tutelo/Monacan People’s homeland and we recognize their continued relationships with their lands and waterways. We further acknowledge that legislation and practices like the Morrill Act (1862) enabled the commonwealth of Virginia to finance and found Virginia Tech through the forced removal of Native Nations from their lands, both locally and in western territories.”*

*- [Virginia Tech’s American Indian & Indigenous Community Center](#)*





# Warm-Up

With a partner, please share:

1. Your name
2. Pronouns
3. Institution
4. One word to describe your conference experience
5. One thing that you do to practice self-care



# What is Trauma?

“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.”<sup>1</sup>

- “70% of adults in the U.S. have experienced at least some type of traumatic event at least once in their lives.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)

<sup>2</sup> National Council for Behavioral Health



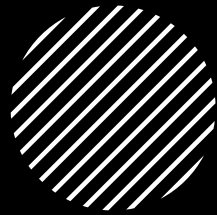
# Types of trauma

Bullying  
Community Violence  
Disasters  
Intimate partner  
violence  
Medical  
Abuse (physical, sexual,  
mental, and emotional)  
Refugee trauma  
Sex trafficking

Terrorism and violence  
Traumatic Grief<sup>3</sup>  
Adverse Child  
Experiences (ACE)  
Racial  
Gender-based  
Inter-generational  
COVID-19 Pandemic



# Traumatic Experiences in the Classroom<sup>4</sup>

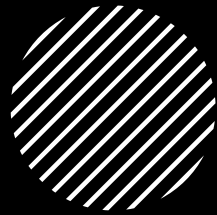


- No content warning
- Volunteering students to speak about their experiences
- Use of dehumanizing and racist slurs / racially derogatory language
- Incorrect name and pronoun usage
- Ableism and the lack of accommodations for students with disabilities
- Students not feeling believed/having to disclose trauma





# Impact of Trauma on Student Learning

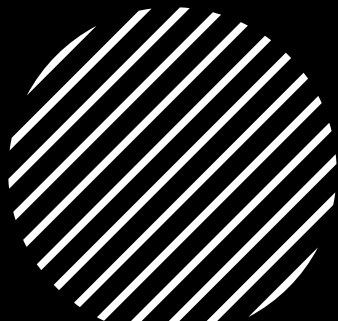


Studies show that students who have faced trauma in their lives **struggle to self-regulate, to communicate their emotional state, maintain concentration, stay organized,** and they can become **distrustful** of others. Disorganization and **memory loss** are also trauma-related responses.

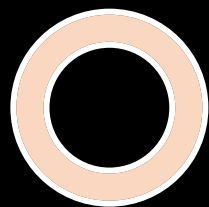


# The Need for Trauma- Informed Pedagogy

“Individuals who live in traumatic situations are likely to experience a **complete loss of control and sense of powerlessness**. As such, regaining control is crucial to coping with traumatic stressors (Perry & Szalavitz, 2006). In the classroom, this translates to implementing practices that value and encourage students’ participation in decisions that matter to them. The end result of this practice is students who feel empowered and in control of their lives”<sup>6</sup>



<sup>6</sup> Zacarian, Alvarez-Ortiz & Haynes, 2017, p.90



# Objectives of Trauma-Informed Teaching and Learning<sup>8</sup>



1. Recognize the impact of violence and victimization on development, learning, and coping strategies
2. Minimize possibilities of re-traumatization and maximize possibilities of successful educational outcomes
3. Identify successful educational outcomes as the primary goal
4. **Employ an empowerment model**
5. Strive to maximize choices and control
6. Mitigate power imbalances through relational collaboration
7. Create an atmosphere that is respectful of the need for safety, respect, and acceptance
8. **Emphasize strengths, highlighting competencies over deficiencies and resilience over pathology**
9. Strive to be culturally competent and to understand people in the context of their life experiences and cultural background
10. Solicit input from all class members and involve them in evaluation processes



Brain Break<sup>10</sup>






# From Deficits to Strengths: Finding Students' Inner Wealth

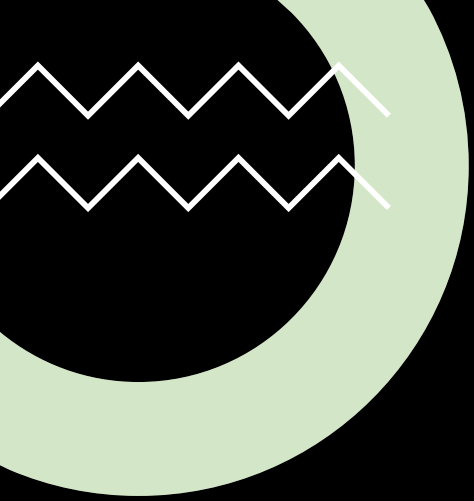
- “Adopting a strengths-based perspective requires us to find evidence “in what students do; in what they don’t; and in their intentions, hopes, successes, and even failures.”<sup>11</sup>
- Ensuring that we do not depend on student resilience
  - Our students are capable, but not invincible superheroes. Resilience is a skill that must be carried by wraparound supports.

<sup>11</sup>Zacarian, Alvarez-Ortiz & Haynes, 2017, as cited in Grove & Glasser, 2007, p.85



Values & Qualities  
worth  
Acknowledging<sup>12</sup>

Adaptability	Humility
Affirmation	Humor
Commitment	Industriousness
Courage	Insight
Daring	Loyalty
Depth	Mindfulness
Endurance	Passion
Energy	Perseverance
Experimentation	Professionalism
Faith	Relaxation
Flexibility	Resilience
Friendship	Respect
Generosity	Sacrifice
Honesty	Self-control
Honor	Validation
	Value
	Wit



- What do we know about the student?
- What behaviors signify that the student is experiencing or dealing with trauma?
- What would be the traditional or deficit-based approach to responding to this student's behavior?
- What would be the alternative, strengths-based approach to responding to this student's behavior? How is this student demonstrating resilience?
- How can we as educators prevent or proactively support students experiencing or living with trauma?

## Questions to Consider



## Case Study #1

Aiden attended the first class but has not attended since. Three weeks into the semester they respond to a course email to tell you they've been out sick and things have been hard. They don't provide additional context.

- What behaviors signify that the student is experiencing or dealing with trauma?
- What would be the traditional or deficit-based approach to responding to this student's behavior?
  - How is this student demonstrating resilience? How do we approach this from a strengths-based point of view?



# Breakout Groups

---

- What behaviors signify that the student is experiencing or dealing with trauma?
- What would be the traditional or deficit-based approach to responding to this student's behavior?
- How is this student demonstrating resilience? How do we approach this from a strengths-based point of view?

---

Shariah writes on your pre-class check in that she loves to participate and learn from peers. Shariah has not been engaging in class discussions and is on her computer most class sessions.

---

Jamiei stayed after class to let you know they are a resident assistant (RA) in their dorm and they will need to be out next week to deal with a resident suicide.

---

Fallon has just emailed you and your TA that they are out of late passes, but that they need a late pass for an upcoming assignment. Fallon also states the late pass policy is not working and students do not like it.

---

Tiffanie comes to your office hours for support on homework and shares that they don't feel safe in class. As such they have missed well over the allotted number of absences.

A decorative graphic on a black background. A large white circle is centered, with a thick light green double-line border on its right side. To the left of the circle are two white wavy lines. Below the circle is a solid light orange circle. To the right of the circle is a grid of small white dots. In the top right corner is a small double-circle icon with a light orange outer ring and a white inner ring.

Share outs

# Elements of TI Proactive Course Design<sup>13</sup>



Collaboration with students on learning outcomes and class policies (such as technology use or syllabus readings)




Flexible late assignment/early feedback policy



In-class brain breaks, warm-ups and class check-ins



Providing clear instruction and examples for activities or assignments



PEOPLE WILL FORGET  
WHAT YOU SAID.  
PEOPLE WILL FORGET  
WHAT YOU DID.  
BUT PEOPLE WILL  
NEVER FORGET HOW  
YOU MADE THEM FEEL.

*Maya Angelou*



# Resources & References

1. [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration](#)
2. [National Council for Behavioral Health](#)
3. [The National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#)
4. Bagliere, J. (2020, September 27). Science shows watching cute animals is good for your health. *CNN*. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/09/27/us/watching-cute-animals-study-scn-trnd/index.html>
5. Brunzell, T., Stokes, H., Waters, L. (2016). Trauma-informed flexible learning: Classrooms that strengthen regulatory abilities. *International Journal of Child, Youth and Family Studies*, 7(2), 218-239. <http://www.doi.org/10.18357/ijcyfs72201615719>
6. Carello, J., Butler, L.D. (2015). Practicing what we teach: Trauma-informed educational practice. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, 35(3), 262-278. <http://www.doi.org/10.1080/08841233.2015.1030059>
7. Crosby, S.D., Howell, P., Thomas, S. (2018). Social justice education through trauma-informed teaching. *Middle School Journal*, 49(4), 15-23. DOI: 10.1080/00940771.2018.1488470
8. Harrison, N., Burke, J., & Clarke, I. (2020). Risky teaching: developing a trauma-informed pedagogy for higher education. *Teaching in Higher Education*. <http://www.doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2020.1786046>
9. Horan, E., and Dagne, M. (2021, August 11). *A Trauma-Informed Fall 2021 Semester*. [PowerPoint slides]. The Center for Teaching, Research & Learning.