Fostering Resilience:

Working with Trauma-Affected Learners

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Resiliency & Well-being

- Using the following scale...

- 0 = At no time
- 1 = Some of the time
- 2 = Less than \( \frac{1}{2} \) of the time
- 3 = More than \( \frac{1}{2} \) of the time
- 4 = Most of the time
- 5 = All of the time
In the last 2 weeks...

0=none, 1=some, 2=less ½, 3=more ½, 4=most, 5=all

1. I have felt cheerful and in good spirits.
2. I have felt calm and relaxed.
3. I have felt active and vigorous.
4. I woke up feeling fresh and rested.
5. My daily life has been filled with things that interest me.

* WHO-5 Wellbeing Index
Raise your hand if...

- You score 20 or above
- You score 15-19
- You score 12-14
- You score 6-11
- You score 0-5

*Scores less than 13, or if you scored 0 or 1 to any item indicates risk.*
See Resiliency:
There are always 2 stories..

- **The story of the pain**
  - Hollywood movie script
  - Leaves us feeling broken, powerless

- **The story of survival**
  - Less sensational
  - Focus on resources & resiliency
  - Leaves us feeling alive and more whole
The Connection between Trauma & Learning

- **Adverse Childhood Events (ACE) Study**
  - 1995-1997
  - 17,000 participants
  - Explored link between 8 potential childhood experiences and long term education and health outcomes

8 Adverse Childhood Events

- Substance abuse in the home
- Parental separation or divorce
- Mental illness in the home
- Witnessing domestic violence
- Suicidal household member
- Death of a parent or another loved one
- Parental incarceration
- Experience of abuse (psychological, physical or sexual) or neglect (physical or emotional)
## Educational Outcomes*

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<th>Behaviour</th>
<th>Coursework</th>
<th>Health</th>
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<td>4.9x</td>
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<td>4.3x</td>
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Definitions

“Trauma is a wound resulting from experiences of intense fear which cause psychological, physical, emotional, relational and/or spiritual disturbances that continue after the event itself is over.”
Types of Trauma

- **Shock Trauma**
  - Single Episode of paralyzing fear
  - Natural disasters, violence, etc.

- **Developmental Trauma**
  - Multiple episodes during developmental phases in life
  - Ongoing exposure to stress & fear

- **Cultural Trauma**
  - Impacts collective groups of people
  - Loss of identity, cultural shame, loss of safety within cultural group, internalized oppression

- **War-Related Trauma**
  - Combination of the above
Continuum of Traumatic Reaction

- Reactions to Traumatic events are more common than we often talk about.
- Everyone responds to traumatic events differently for many reasons
- Not all reactions meet the threshold for a diagnosis of PTSD
  - Can still cause impacts or impairment to daily life
3 sets of Symptoms

1. High alert – fight/flight
2. Re-Experiencing
3. Numbing / Avoidance
Impacts all areas of our lives

- Spiritual
- Physical
- Emotional
- Behavioral
- Relational
- Cognitive
Impacts to Meaning

- In the absence of Trauma, we like to believe:
  - Life is predictable
  - Good things happen to good people
    - If you are good, you will be ok
    - Bad people get their just desserts
  - Everything has meaning
  - Everything works out in the end
How Trauma symptoms MAY present differently in Refugee populations

- Minimized expression
- Increased hesitancy to share or acknowledge vulnerabilities
- More somatization of symptoms, less emotional expression
- Multiple exposure interferes with linking symptoms to specific events or situations - normalized reactivity / symptoms
- Potential to still be in “shock” stage or dissociated
- More concern for or focus on family members concerns than their own
Impact of process of immigration / resettlement

- Multiple losses on multiple levels
- Prolonged experiences of fear, anxiety, uncertainty
- Issues of trust with service providers, community
- Prolonged experience in camps and journeys to camps
- Living with uncertain future
- May or may not feel safe in Canada
- Prolonged exposure to high cortisol in the system
Heightened Factors con’t.

- Potential different relationship with medication
  - Lack of assumed understanding
  - Cultural / religious prohibitions impact prescriptions
- Increased isolation
- Some of the trauma load is collective experience
- Cultural differences around authority figures
- Cultural understanding of Mental Illness – usually includes increased stigma
- Depending on stage in settlement process, multiple stresses dealing with basic needs
Components of a Trauma Informed Classroom

- Understanding of Trauma
- Support for all
- Safe Activities
- Safe Environment
- Safe Relationships

Support for all
What’s our context?

- How many of us have worked with people who have trauma?
- How many of us have family members who are affected by trauma?
- How many of us carry our own personal trauma?
Learning Mode

- What is learning mode?

- How can you tell when your students are on learning mode?
Survival mode VS. Learning mode

- We can be on one OR the other.

- Learning mode only occurs when our Survival mode is offline.

- Trauma triggers our Survival mode
How to recognize Survival Mode?

- Deer in headlights
- Breathing shallow (freeze), or very strong and deep (rage)
- Presence of extremes of fear/anger
- Shut-down
- 1000 mile gaze / no blinking
- Increased startle response
- Increased anxiety / panic
- Restlessness
- Irritability
- Lower tolerance to frustration
- Inability to focus / concentrate
Survival Mode:

- Shuts down thinking brain
  - Attempts to think escalate the situation
- Focus is on fight/flight & immediate safety
- Stress hormones flood the body – cortisol, adrenaline
- Digestion stops, increased heart rate, sweating
- Increased fear / anxiety / panic
Impacts to learning

- Attendance / Absenteeism
- Brain damage / learning disabilities
- Academic Performance
- Cognitive abilities & processing
- Problem Solving
- Focus / Attention
- Retaining new memories
- Recalling old memories
- Creativity
- Abstract thought

...Are all possible impacts
Impacts to memory

- **Memory changes during Survival Mode:**
  - Blocks Explicit Memories (who, what, when, where, why, how)
  - Increases Emotional associations (hard-wires triggers into brain)
- This means more powerful emotional associations during heightened stress, but less access to specific memory to give the context.
Aspects of Memory

- Trauma can disconnect or erase the parts

Full Memory

- Thoughts
- Feelings
- Images
- Sounds
- Sense of time / order of events
- Body sensations
- Context
Amygdala as Shock-Absorber

- **Role of the Amygdala**
  - Emotional regulation
  - **Shock-absorber** – allows only a measured amount of electrical charge through to rest of brain
  - **Can be “blown” by trauma** leaving a person uniquely vulnerable to stress & re-traumatization
Understanding Dissociation

Arousal
Threshold

Arousal
Baseline
Understanding Dissociation con’t..
Understanding Dissociation con’t..

Arousal Threshold

Dissociation Flooding

Arousal

Baseline

Identifiable Students
fight/flight, acting out behaviours...
Understanding Dissociation con’t..
Classrooms can trigger Trauma (& survival mode)

- Subject material (direct & indirect)
- Power relationships
- Sensory Overload
- Confrontations
- Unpredictability
- Relationships with other students
- Feeling vulnerable, powerless, stupid
- Fears of rejection, failure
How to Manage Survival Mode

- Regulation skills – yours and theirs
- Re-establishment of sense of safety
- Reorienting to what is happening in the moment
- Takes time for stress hormones to leave system
- Encourage slower and calmer
- Give choice before returning to activities
- Be very careful about disciplinary measures. Choice happens in the pre-frontal cortex, not base level of brain
What we need to switch from survival to learning mode?

- Safety
- Grounding
- Sense of Having Time
- Consistency
- Predictability
- Connection
- Meaningful choices in our lives
- Assistance regulating emotions & stress
- Help keeping environment calm, predictable
- Other’s to manage their own activation around us
- ...

…
What impacts do you see in your classrooms?

- How do you see this in your own schools?
- What questions do you have?
Solutions

- In the Classroom
- With Yourself & Each Other
Safe Environment

- Clear, established values that benefit all, and are followed by all.
  - Respect, Cooperation, Kindness (Malchiodi, pg 106)
  - Students need to know how to please
- Lowered amount of stimuli – visual, auditory, scent...
- Flexible seating
- Clear, appropriate & transparent limits that are for everyone’s benefit
- Well-managed transitions
- Predictability
- Discipline is trauma-informed
Setting boundaries

- Trauma (especially at human hands) occurs with many severe boundary crossings.

- Limits are essential for us to feel safe, and healthy boundaries are essential for recovery.

- Leaders who can respectfully enforce the limits are essential for us to feel safe.
Be Cautious with Consequences..

- Activation from trauma occurs at lower levels of the brain
- Fight/Flight responses bypass pre-frontal cortex
- Power plays and punishment can reproduce traumatic experiences & traumatic responses
  - May control behaviour in the short term at the cost of respect & safety
Trauma Informed Discipline

- Focus on safety for all, and a return to safety
- Focus on rewarding positives, modeling
- 10:1 ratio for positives to corrections
- Understands the role behaviour was playing
- Understands the needs underneath the behaviour
- Separates behaviour from person
- Responds appropriately to the activation level of the youth and allows time for regulation
- Clearly establishes expectations and a route back from bad choices
Safe Relationships

- Trauma and attachment-informed
- Trustworthy, caring, dependable
- Congruent & transparent (wysiwyg)
- Sensitive to needs (Malchiodi pg 97)
- Teachers as caring leaders

“Bigger, Stronger, Wiser, Kind”

vs.

“Mean, Weak & Gone” (Circle of Security)
Safe Activities

- So many possibilities...
- Be careful of trauma triggers
  - Content
    - Feeling stupid / powerless / embarrassed
- Relevant / Meaningful
- Able to succeed with moderate work
- Regular activities to encourage regulation
Support for All

- Students
- Families
- Teachers
- Support Staff
- Admin
Don’t forget...

- Value what you're already doing

- students struggling does not mean you are doing anything wrong - could be you are doing everything right. Review the ERA (environment, relationship, activities) for triggers, ground yourself, be calm & kind
Ways to help in the Classroom

- Individual solutions for individual challenges
- Give meaningful choice
- See strengths & resiliency
- Slower is faster
- Smaller tasks
- Promote predictability
- Promote sense of safety
- Avoid re-traumatizing
- Adapt Classroom expectations
- Manage behaviour in trauma-informed ways
- Caring for ourselves and each other
How to Support Yourself & Each Other
“The expectation that we can be immersed in suffering and loss daily and not be touched by it is as unrealistic as expecting to be able to walk through water without getting wet.”

- Naomi Rachel Remen
Risk Factors

- Exposure to stories/details about suffering
- Lack of Sleep, poor nutrition
- Lack of progress / change despite your efforts
- Your own early childhood experiences of loss, isolation or neglect
- Connections with those you are working with
- Personal issues that are triggered by those you are working with
- Having empathy
- Your own trauma history
- Feelings of helplessness and powerlessness to help alleviate suffering
- Feelings of responsibility for those affected by trauma
Things to look out for in yourself, colleagues & staff

- Feelings of emotional exhaustion
- Increased irritability at home
- Increased dissociation, memory lapses, concentration issues
- No time for self / family / friends / healthy living
- Heightened startle response
- Feelings of powerlessness / frustration at learners / learner-blaming
- Sarcasm / “Dark” humour
- Increased substance use
- Survivors guilt
- Burnout...... Compassion Fatigue...... Vicarious Trauma
Realities of Compassion Fatigue, Burnout, Vicarious Trauma

- Happens to EVERYONE
- Result of compassion & working hard (role of mirror neurons)
- Cumulative impact over time and exposure

- Recovery is possible
Debriefing

- What was that like for you?
  (Past orientation, general)
- What was the hardest part?
  (Past, specific – negative)
- What was the most rewarding/meaningful?
  (Past, specific – positive)
- What do you need now?
  (present/future, needs based)
An important difference:

- **Venting**: Talking about others, and trying to get people to side with us against them.

- **Debriefing**: Talking about ourselves, and our full reactions (learnings, struggles, connections) to other people and their behaviour.
Balancing, not Balance.

- **Remember that balancing** is an active process, not an end state. We are constantly being affected by the relationships and experiences around us. Mindfully balancing helps us stay upright.
Free online stress tests are available at:

- Professional Quality of Life
- Compassion Fatigue Self-Test
- Life Stress Self-Test

www.compassionfatigue.org
Balancing...

- Something Creative
- Something Fun
- Something Alone
- Something to Connect with Others
- Something to Connect with Emotions
- Something to Release Emotions
- Something Physical
- Something to Learn Something New
- Something that Gives me Meaning in my life
- Something for no reason what-so-ever.