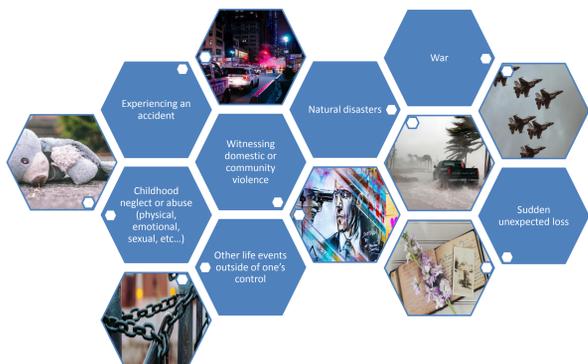


Managing Risk by Understanding Trauma

Jenna Westendorf
(916) 995-4351
jenna.westendorf@gmail.com

What is Trauma?

“Experiences that overwhelm an individual’s capacity to cope”



Instructors do not need to be trained clinical therapists or require disclosure of a student’s trauma to facilitate a course that can promote growth and healing for all students. Instructors only need to be aware that trauma exists, of the ways trauma can affect a student’s participation on course, and how this understanding can allow the instructors to facilitate a course on which all students can fully participate.

Signs of Trauma

Physical	Emotional or Cognitive	Spiritual	Interpersonal	Behavioral
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unexplained chronic pain or numbness Headaches Trouble sleeping 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Depression or anxiety Difficulties regulating or expressing emotions Difficulty concentrating Distorted reasoning Hypervigilance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Loss of meaning or faith No sense of connection Feelings of guilt or shame Self-blame or self-hate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Frequent conflict in relationships Lack of trust Difficulty establishing and maintaining close relationships Difficulty setting boundaries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Isolation Self-harm Substance use High risk behaviors Cycles of re-enactment

Not all students who demonstrate these signs have experienced trauma. Furthermore, there may be no signs exhibited at all from someone who has experienced trauma. Everyone is different, including how they respond to trauma.

Key Elements of Trauma-Informed Practice



Trauma-informed practices benefit all students, not just those who have been affected by trauma. These elements are necessary to foster an environment in which all students can participate and grow on course.

Why is it Important to Understand Trauma?

Childhood trauma affects one in every six people and poses one of the greatest public health concerns in the United States (Center for Youth Wellness, 2014). Furthermore, it affects everyone who is connected to that student who has been traumatized.

Research points to the importance of trauma-informed practices in alleviating the effects of trauma in youth. Research also provides evidence that outdoor education programs can take trauma-informed practices a step further in helping traumatized youth due to outdoor education programs’ addition of nature and movement to aid in the healing process of traumatized youth.

Preparing for Course

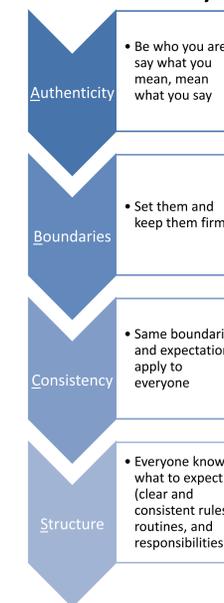
- Develop *self-awareness* of your own history and experiences with trauma as well as the ways in which your own identity and biases affect your interactions with students.
- Increase your understanding of *trauma-informed practices* so that you can hold a space for all students to thrive on course.
- Proactively anticipate and plan* as much of the course flow and delivery as possible in advance to include all elements of trauma-informed practices.

For example...

Course Activity	Key Element Addressed	Considerations	Ideas
Icebreakers	Builds trust and feelings of safety early on and encourages peer support and collaboration	Select activities that allow students to get to know each other in a safe environment. Notice any individual and/or group dynamics already emerging.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Go around question Ball pass Elbow tag
Introduction/Framing	Builds instructor trustworthiness and transparency and sets the tone for creating a safe and inclusive space on course	Clearly outline group expectations and instructors’ roles from the beginning and maintain consistency in setting limits and holding students to these expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explain flow of the day Introduce instructors and key roles of instructors

Engaging with Youth

The ABCS for cultivating a sense of safety:



Throughout course...

- Constantly check your own assumptions and biases
- Assess each student’s individual strengths and needs and support each student individually
- Consider all barriers to student engagement and collaborate with students to overcome these barriers
- Role model and mentor students in healthy communication, boundaries and positive relationships
- Constantly work to build rapport with all students evenly
- Encourage students to share their voice; give students responsibilities; respect students’ ability to make decisions
- Develop a routine to provide students with some level of consistency and familiarity
- Maintain consistency and transparency
- Clearly communicate all transitions
- Collaborate with students on course structure and flow and include students in decision making processes
- Facilitate regular individual check-ins with youth
- Ensure that you are practicing self-care

Responding to a Student

The following considerations can assist instructors any time they notice any “signs of trauma”, regardless if the behavior is a response to trauma or not.

- Instead of thinking “what is wrong with this student?” consider “what happened to this student?”
- Notice your own internal reactions
- Pay attention to the student’s bodily responses and words
- Offer verbal support and grounding
- Remain present
- Continue to offer grounding and calming
- Strengthen empowerment and collaboration; encourage youth participation in the process
- Call in your co-instructor or any other member of your program’s team to assist you

Key Points

- Trauma is prevalent and can affect each student differently and throughout their life.
- By working with students through a trauma-informed lens, you can make a huge difference in their life.
- Practice self care!

Action Steps

- Provide additional trauma training for staff at your organization.
- Plan a meeting with staff at your organization to brainstorm ways to make program elements specific to your organization trauma-informed.
- Develop a system to support instructors both in responding to students’ trauma in the field as well as in debriefing their own experience of the students’ trauma after returning from the field.