



Trauma-Informed Approaches in Higher Education

Supporting Students Through Difficult Times



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Understanding the Context



The Reality for Ukrainian Students

Many Ukrainian university students have lived through war, displacement, or prolonged uncertainty. These experiences deeply affect their nervous system, sense of safety, and ability to learn.

Why This Matters

Trauma doesn't just affect emotions—it impacts cognitive function, memory, concentration, and the ability to engage with academic material. Understanding this context is the first step toward effective support.

Impact Areas

- Nervous system dysregulation
- Loss of sense of safety
- Impaired learning capacity
- Emotional volatility
- Difficulty with trust

"This presentation explores how educators can respond using trauma-informed approaches that prioritize safety and healing."

What is a Trauma-Informed Approach?



You Don't Need to Be a Psychologist

A trauma-informed approach **does not require you to be a psychologist**. It simply means teaching and interacting in ways that avoid re-traumatization and promote trust .



The Ultimate Goal

The goal is to create an environment where **every student feels safe, seen, and supported**—regardless of their background or experiences. When students feel secure, they can engage with learning more effectively.

Key Principles

Safety First: Physical and emotional safety are prerequisites for learning



Trustworthiness: Building transparent, consistent relationships



Peer Support: Creating community and mutual aid



Collaboration: Sharing power and decision-making



Empowerment: Validating and building on strengths

Remember: Small changes in how we interact can have profound impacts on students' sense of safety and belonging.

The Six Rs Framework

Based on principles from SAMHSA, adapted for university contexts

Realization

Understanding how trauma affects individuals and communities at biological, psychological, and social levels.

 Awareness & Understanding

Respect

Maintaining dignity, empathy, and cultural sensitivity in all interactions with students and colleagues.

 Dignity & Empathy

2 Recognition

Identifying signs of trauma and distress in students through behavioral, emotional, and academic indicators.

 Observation & Identification

5 Resilience

Helping students build coping skills, self-efficacy, and the capacity to adapt and thrive despite adversity.

 Growth & Strength

3 Response

Acting in ways that promote safety, empowerment, and healing through thoughtful interventions and support.

 Action & Intervention

6 Relationships

Creating authentic, supportive connections that provide stability and a sense of belonging for students.

 Connection & Belonging

Realization & Recognition

Realization

Understanding how trauma affects individuals and communities at multiple levels—biological, psychological, and social.

Key Understanding Areas:

- Neurobiological impact
- Cognitive function
- Learning capacity
- Emotional regulation
- Social relationships
- Sense of safety

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Recognition

Identifying signs of trauma and distress in students through careful observation of behavioral, emotional, and academic indicators.

Signs to Watch For:

- Withdrawal or isolation
- Emotional outbursts
- Declining performance
- Difficulty concentrating
- Physical complaints
- Hypervigilance

Why These Matter

Together, Realization and Recognition form the **foundation of awareness** that enables appropriate, compassionate responses to students in distress.

- Prevents misinterpretation of behavior
- Guides appropriate intervention
- Reduces stigma and blame
- Builds empathy and understanding

Important: Recognition is not about diagnosing—it's about noticing and responding with care.

Response & Respect

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Response

Acting in ways that promote safety and empowerment through thoughtful, intentional interventions in our daily interactions.

Practical Responses:

- ✓ Ensure privacy when discussing sensitive topics
- ✓ Offer choices to restore sense of control
- ✓ Use calm, non-judgmental language
- ✓ Provide clear expectations and structure
- ✓ Connect to resources when needed

Respect

Maintaining dignity, empathy, and cultural sensitivity in all interactions, honoring each student's unique experience and background.

Respectful Practices:

- Listen without judgment or interruption
- Validate feelings and experiences
- Avoid assumptions about experiences
- Honor cultural differences and backgrounds
- Maintain confidentiality and trust

The Power of Language

The words we choose matter profoundly. Small shifts in language can either trigger distress or promote safety.

Instead of:

"Why aren't you paying attention?"

Try

"I notice you seem distracted. Is everything okay?"

Remember: Response and Respect work together—how we respond demonstrates the respect we hold for our students.

Resilience & Relationships

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Resilience

Helping students build coping skills and self-efficacy—the belief in their own ability to handle challenges and recover from setbacks.

Building Resilience:

- Teach coping strategies for stress
- Normalize challenges as part of growth
- Highlight strengths and resources
- Celebrate small wins and progress
- Encourage self-compassion
- Foster problem-solving skills

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Relationships

Creating authentic, supportive connections that provide stability, trust, and a sense of belonging for students navigating difficult times.

Building Relationships:

- Be consistently present and available
- Follow through on commitments
- Practice active listening
- Show genuine interest in students
- Create safe spaces for expression
- Model healthy boundaries

The Synergy Effect

Resilience and Relationships work together to foster long-term healing and growth. Strong relationships provide the foundation for building resilience.

"Relationships are the vehicle through which resilience is built."

Key Insight

When students feel connected and supported, they are better able to develop the internal resources needed to cope with adversity.

Practical Application: Privacy and Choice



Always Start with Privacy

When approaching a student about a sensitive topic, **ensure privacy first**.

This means finding a quiet, confidential space away from peers and potential interruptions.

Why it matters: Privacy protects dignity and creates psychological safety, allowing students to be more open and honest.



Give Students Choice

Giving students the choice to share or not helps restore their sense of control—something trauma often takes away. Never force disclosure.

Why it matters: Choice empowers students and respects their autonomy, rebuilding trust in themselves and others.

Example Language

Use calm, non-judgmental language that invites conversation without demanding it:

"I've noticed you seem tired lately—would you like to talk about how you're doing?"

Observational: States what you notice

Non-judgmental: Avoids blame or assumptions

Invitational: Offers choice to respond

Open-ended: Allows for various responses

Small Actions, Big Impact

These small but meaningful actions demonstrate care and respect, creating the foundation for trust and healing.

Practical Application: Predictability

Why Predictability Matters

Trauma can make uncertainty unbearable. When the nervous system is on high alert, unexpected changes or unclear expectations can trigger stress responses.

The science: Predictability helps regulate the autonomic nervous system, reducing the fight-flight-freeze response and allowing the brain to focus on learning.






Communicate Clearly

Communicate schedules, deadlines, and expectations clearly. Provide information in multiple formats and repeat key details to ensure understanding.

Best practices: Use written syllabi, verbal reminders, visual timelines, and digital calendars to reinforce expectations.

Small Gestures, Big Difference

Even small gestures help students feel grounded and secure:

-  Summarize next steps at the end of meetings
-  Preview upcoming topics at the start of class
-  Give advance notice of changes or transitions
-  Outline the agenda at the beginning of sessions
-  Signal transitions before they happen

The Goal

Create a sense of safety through structure and consistency, allowing students to focus their energy on learning rather than managing anxiety.

Avoiding Triggers



Understanding Triggers

Certain stimuli can trigger **physiological stress reactions** in students who have experienced trauma. This is not about being "too sensitive"—it's about a nervous system that is already on high alert.

Remember: Triggers are not logical—they are neurological responses rooted in past experiences of danger.



Common Triggers to Avoid

Being mindful of potential triggers in the classroom environment can prevent re-traumatization and create a safer learning space.



Sudden Loud Noises



Harsh Criticism



Public Confrontations

What Happens When Triggered

When triggered, the body activates the stress response:

- 1 **Amygdala hijack:** The brain's alarm system activates
- 2 **Physiological changes:** Heart rate increases, breathing quickens
- 3 **Cognitive impairment:** Prefrontal cortex goes offline
- 4 **Learning stops:** Brain cannot process new information

Prevention is Key

By being proactive in avoiding triggers, we protect students' capacity to learn and engage.

Caring for Yourself as an Educator

Compassion Fatigue is Real

When you listen to many stories of pain, you may start feeling overwhelmed, emotionally drained, or disconnected. This is a natural response—not a sign of weakness.

Signs to watch for: Exhaustion, irritability, difficulty sleeping, reduced empathy, feeling helpless or hopeless.

Why Self-Care Matters

Taking care of yourself isn't selfish—it's **necessary for sustainable effectiveness**.

You cannot pour from an empty cup.

The ripple effect: When you care for yourself, you model healthy boundaries and self-compassion for your students.

Self-Care Strategies



Take Short Breaks

Step away between classes or meetings to reset



Talk with Colleagues

Share experiences and support one another



Set Emotional Boundaries

Know your limits and when to refer to professionals



Practice Mindfulness

Use breathing exercises or brief meditations



Seek Support

Access counseling or supervision when needed

Remember: Taking care of yourself allows you to stay effective and empathetic for the long term.



Creating Safe Spaces for Learning

When safety comes first, learning can follow. By implementing trauma-informed approaches, we create environments where every student—including those affected by war or loss—can heal, grow, and succeed.

"The Six Rs provide a roadmap for creating classrooms and campuses where all students feel safe, seen, and supported. Small changes in how we teach and interact can have profound impacts on students' lives."