



# Trauma-Informed Pedagogy in Higher Education

Dina Warren, MACM, OTR  
Abilene Christian University



# Agenda

## INTRODUCTION

---

Prevalence of Trauma and MH in  
College Students

---

Impacts of Trauma on Learning

---

Trauma Informed Pedagogy

---

Classroom Strategies

## A little about me:

- \* Assistant Professor in the Occupational Therapy Department
- \* Currently working on obtaining an EdD in Community Care & Counseling with a cognate in Traumatology (current dissertation candidate)
- \* Occupational Therapist for 25 years
- \* Married for 24 years and have an 18-year-old daughter who is a HS school senior
- \* I am a trauma survivor



Discussion ...

## Student mental health and wellness

\*What are your perceptions of students' mental health since COVID-19?

\* Have the supports you provide in your classroom changed over the past 4-5 years? If so, how?



# College Student MH

- Approximately half of mental health disorders have their first onset by mid-adolescence and  $\frac{3}{4}$  by the mid-twenties
- Growing evidence for a mental health crisis in college students
  - Healthy Minds Study found that more than 60% of college students met criteria for at least one mental health condition (Lipson et al., 2022)
  - National College Health Assessment noted  $\frac{3}{4}$  of students reported moderate to severe psychological distress (American College Health Association, 2021)
  - Number of students seeking help from on-campus counseling centers has doubled over the past decade (Abrams, 2022)
  - Graduate students are 6X as likely to experience depression and anxiety when compared to the general population (Evans et al., 2018)

# What is Trauma?

- **Adversities** = negative life experiences
- **Stress** = our body's natural physiological response to adversity
- **Toxic stress** = adversities that are long-lasting, intense or frequent, which occur without buffering from nurturing relationships; the body's systems are overwhelmed and have prolonged activation of stress responses, leading to dysregulation
- **Trauma** = an event, or series of events, experienced by a person that is perceived to be harmful; affects one's mental, physical, spiritual, and emotional well-being
- **Complex trauma** = the accumulation of multiple types of trauma
- **Big "T" events** = often related to life-threatening events (i.e., household violence and abuse, school shootings, natural disasters, serious car accidents)
- **Little "t" events** = not life-threatening but cause significant distress (i.e., death of a family member, losing a job, bullying)

(Forkey et al., 2021; Newport Institute, 2022)



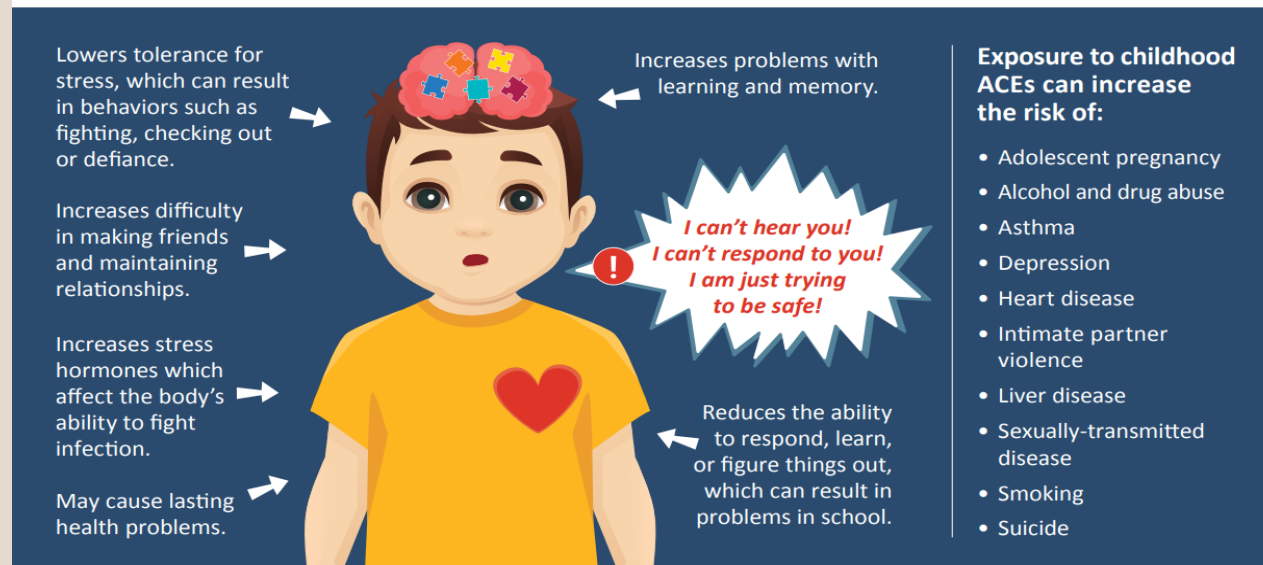
# Prevalence of Trauma

- Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)
  - Study completed by the CDC and Kaiser Permanente from 1995 to 1997; over 17,000 participants
  - 2/3 of participants reported at least one ACE; 1 in 5 people reported 3+ (ACEs rates higher in men for 1 or 2; higher in women for 3+)
  - 10 questions specifically addressing the history of abuse, neglect, household violence, having a parent incarcerated, parental divorce or separation, history of parental mental health or substance misuse
  - The study has been replicated in 35 states & the District of Columbia with similar results

(CDC, 2021)

# Understanding ACEs

ACEs (Adverse Childhood Experiences) are serious childhood traumas that can result in toxic stress. Prolonged exposure to ACEs can create toxic stress, which can damage the developing brain and body of children and affect overall health. Toxic stress may prevent a child from learning or playing in a healthy way with other children, and can cause long-term health problems.



## ACEs (Adverse Childhood Experiences) can include:

- Abuse: Emotional / physical / sexual
- Bullying / violence of / by another child, sibling, or adult
- Homelessness
- Household: Substance abuse / mental illness / domestic violence / incarceration / parental abandonment, divorce, loss
- Involvement in child welfare system
- Medical trauma
- Natural disasters and war
- Neglect: Emotional / physical
- Racism, sexism, or any other form of discrimination
- Violence in community

## ! SURVIVAL MODE RESPONSE

Toxic stress increases a child's heart rate, blood pressure, breathing and muscle tension. Their thinking brain is knocked off-line. Self-protection is their priority.

Parents and caregivers can help. **Turn over to learn about resilience.**

# Impacts of Trauma on Learning

- Changes in the brain
  - Larger overactive amygdala
  - Atrophied hippocampus
  - Under-responsive prefrontal cortex and anterior cingulate cortex
  - Causes overactive sympathetic nervous system resulting in anxiety, hypervigilance, inability to process information or perform problem-solving
- Symptoms observed:
  - Dysregulation (emotional & behavioral)
  - Reduced cognitive functioning
  - Difficulty making friends; healthy relationships
  - Decreased sleep
  - Unable to keep up with educational responsibilities
  - Decreased leisure engagement and self-care skills
  - Increased feelings of hopelessness

(Forkey et al., 2021; Uhernik, 2017)



# The Neurobiology of Trauma

Prefrontal Cortex

Anterior Cingulate Cortex

Amygdala

Hippocampus



# Trauma-informed Pedagogy

- The infusing of trauma-informed principles across academic curriculums (Carello & Thompson, 2022)
- Developed from the SAMHSA Trauma-Informed Framework
  - 4 R's of trauma-informed approach: realization, recognize, respond, resist retraumatization
  - 6 Principles of a trauma-informed approach: safety; trust and transparency; peer support; collaboration and mutuality; empowerment, voice, and choice; cultural, historical, and gender issues (SAMHSA, 2014) \*Imad (2022) adds 2 more helping students self-regulate & importance of having a sense of purpose
- Must be cognizant of the learning environment, our verbal and non-verbal cues
  - Create a space that encourages learning for all by promoting a safe climate
  - “A calm nervous system is able to calm another nervous system” (Imad, 2022, p. 39).
- Does not require us to have backgrounds in social work, clinical psychology, or other associated health sciences (Imad, 2022)
- Think of yourself as a “first responder” within the classroom

# Application of Trauma-informed educational practices (TIEPs)

## 1. Safety

- Add trauma statement to your syllabus
- Provide trigger warnings for any potentially sensitive course material
- Offer short breaks during class
- Check in with students; 2-word check at the start of class if size permits
- Provide safe spaces and ways for students to communicate with you
- Incorporate self-reflection
- Integrate self-care

(Gunderson et al., 2023; Radis et al., 2020; Imad, 2022)

## 2. Trust and transparency

- Establish consistent routines and schedules
- Provide flexible due dates (i.e., assignment due over a week period vs. a specific date)
- Ensure assignments have clear instructions and rubrics
- Model professional self-disclosure and boundaries
- Clearly articulate how each assignment aligns with course objectives
- Sending out weekly announcements outlining what will be covered over the coming week and reminders for assignments due

(Gunderson et al., 2023; Radis et al., 2020; Imad, 2022)

# Application of TIEPs

## 3. Peer Support

- Develop a supportive classroom culture where students encourage one another
- Incorporate group projects (consider the use of team contracts)
- Provide opportunities for peer feedback
- Encourage validation of others' feelings
- Allow students to converse in teams during in-class activities and present findings as a group
- Encourage engagement in group leisure activities

(Gunderson et al., 2023; Imad, 2022)

## 4. Collaboration and Mutuality

- Ask students what matters to them, what they want to learn within the class, and what interests them; incorporate ideas as you are able to
- Have mentality of teacher and students working together to facilitate learning
- Incorporate aspects of a flipped classroom
- Ask students to help co-create parts of assignments or grading rubrics
- Use polling or clicker tools

(Gunderson et al., 2023; Imad, 2022)

# Application of TIEPs

## 5. Empowerment, voice, and choice

- Provide choices (i.e., can assignments be in video format vs. written?; selection of topic to present on)
- Reinforce that opinions matter
- Create community agreements using collaborative docs
- Allow students to share input about the course
- Encourage students to advocate for themselves and others
- Educate students about the effects of trauma and create opportunities to build resilience, self-efficacy, and self-esteem
- Teach students how to have self-compassion

(Gunderson et al., 2023; Imad, 2022; Radis et al., 2020)

## 6. Cultural, historical, and gender awareness

- Create opportunities for underrepresented students to share ideas, insights, and opinions
- Ensure all course materials are accessible
- Provide students opportunities to share family traditions or beliefs
- Commit yourself to learning about various cultures
- Select culturally responsive course materials representing diverse voices
- Watch for biases and address them if they surface

(Gunderson et al., 2023; Imad, 2022)

# Application of TIEPs

## 7. Teach students how to self-regulate

- Promote skill development, helping students to understand how their body responds to various sensory stimuli (i.e., help to identify triggers)
- Help understand the relationship between stress, emotions, and cognition
- Encourage a “learning diary” where students make entries when learning is interrupted or challenged
- Help students build resilience, self-compassion, and self-empathy
- Promote self-care

(Imad, 2022; Wuest & Subramaniam, 2022)

## 8. Importance of a sense of purpose

- Provide opportunities for students to reconnect with their sense of purpose
- Have students set learning goals in the course to help reaffirm their existence
- Help students understand how their coursework contributes to beyond the classroom and into the world
- Help students reconnect with spirituality
- Incorporate aspects of service into the course (i.e., service learning, volunteerism, making a project for a local non-profit)

(Imad, 2022)



## Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

While you were growing up, during your first 18 years of life:

- |   |     |    |
|---|-----|----|
| 1. Did a parent or other adult in the household often or very often:<br>Swear at you, insult you, put you down, or humiliate you <b>OR</b> act in a way that made you afraid that you might be physically hurt?   | YES | NO |
| 2. Did a parent or other adult in the household often or very often:<br>Push, grab, slap, or throw something at you <b>OR</b> hit you so hard that you had marks or were injured?   | YES | NO |
| 3. Did an adult or person at least 5 years older than you ever:<br>Touch or fondle you or have you touch their body in a sexual way <b>OR</b> attempt or actually have oral, anal, or vaginal intercourse with you?   | YES | NO |
| 4. Did you often or very often feel that:<br>No one in your family loved you or thought you were important or special <b>OR</b> your family didn't look out for each other, feel close to each other, or support each other?  | YES | NO |
| 5. Did you often or very often feel that:<br>You didn't have enough to eat, had to wear dirty clothes, and had no one to protect you <b>OR</b> your parents were too drunk or high to take care of you or take you to the doctor if you needed it?  | YES | NO |
| 6. Was your mother or stepmother or father or stepfather:<br>Often or very often pushed, grabbed, slapped, or had something thrown at her/him <b>OR</b> sometimes, often, or very often kicked, bitten, hit with a fist, or hit with something hard <b>OR</b> ever repeatedly hit for at least a few minutes or threatened with a knife or gun? | YES | NO |
| 7. Were your parents ever separated or divorced?  | YES | NO |
| 8. Did you live with anyone who was a problem-drinker or alcoholic or who used street drugs or prescription drugs not as prescribed?  | YES | NO |
| 9. Was a household member depressed or mentally ill or did a household member attempt suicide?  | YES | NO |
| 10. Did a household member go to prison?  | YES | NO |

## Protective and Compensatory Experiences (PACES)

When you were growing up, prior to your 18th birthday:

- |   |     |    |
|---|-----|----|
| 1. Did you have someone who loved you unconditionally (you did not doubt that they cared about you)?  | YES | NO |
| 2. Did you have at least one best friend (someone you could trust, had fun with)?   | YES | NO |
| 3. Did you do anything regularly to help others (e.g., volunteer at a hospital, nursing home, church) or do special projects in the community to help others (food drives, Habitat for Humanity)?                     | YES | NO |
| 4. Were you regularly involved in organized sports groups (e.g., soccer, basketball, track) or other physical activity (e.g., competitive cheer, gymnastics, dance, marching band)?                                   | YES | NO |
| 5. Were you an active member of at least one civic group or a non-sport social group such as scouts, church, or youth group?  | YES | NO |
| 6. Did you have an engaging hobby -- an artistic or intellectual pastime either alone or in a group (e.g., chess club, debate team, musical instrument or vocal group, theater, spelling bee, or did you read a lot)? | YES | NO |
| 7. Was there an adult (not your parent) you trusted and could count on when you needed help or advice (e.g., coach, teacher, minister, neighbor, relative)?   | YES | NO |
| 8. Was your home typically clean AND safe with enough food to eat?  | YES | NO |
| 9. Overall, did your schools provide the resources and academic experiences you needed to learn?  | YES | NO |
| 10. In your home, were there rules that were clear and fairly administered?   | YES | NO |

# Self-Care for Educators



Treat yourself  
when you need it



Remember to  
start fresh every  
day



Connect with  
uplifting colleagues



Do physical  
activities you enjoy



Take a break when  
you need one



Use positive self-  
talk



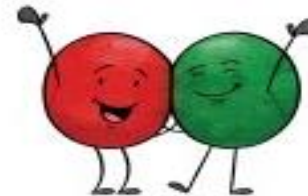
Go for a walk or  
spend time outside



Read a good book  
(just for you)



Plan an activity  
to look forward  
to



Spend time with  
friends and family



Leave work at  
school for the night  
or weekend



Spend less time  
on social media



Bring healthy  
snacks and meals



Be comfortable  
saying "no" to  
more obligations

## Reflection Question ...

- WHAT STRATEGIES COULD YOU INTEGRATE INTO YOUR CURRENT TEACHING PRACTICES?
- DO YOU THINK INTEGRATION WOULD BE CHALLENGING OR EASY?



# References

- Abrams, Z. (2022, Oct. 1). Student mental health is in crisis. Campuses are rethinking their approach. *Monitor on Psychology*, 53(7). <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2022/10/mental-health-campus-care>
- American College Health Association. (2021). National College Health Assessment: Fall 2021 reference group executive summary. ACHA. [https://www.acha.org/documents/ncha/NCHA-III\\_FALL\\_2021\\_REFERENCE\\_GROUP\\_EXECUTIVE\\_SUMMARY.pdf](https://www.acha.org/documents/ncha/NCHA-III_FALL_2021_REFERENCE_GROUP_EXECUTIVE_SUMMARY.pdf)
- Carello, J. & Thompson, P. (2022). Developing a new default in higher education: We are not alone in this work. In P. Thompson & J. Carello (Eds.), *Trauma-informed pedagogies: A guide for responding to crisis and inequality in higher education*. Springer Nature.
- Center for Disease Control. (2021). Adverse Childhood Experiences. CDC. <https://cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/index.html>
- Evans, T. M., Bira, L., Gastelum, J. B., Weiss, L. T., & Vanderford, N. L. (2018). Evidence for a mental health crisis in graduate education. *Nature Biotechnology*, 36(3).282-284. <https://doi.org/10.1038/nbt.4089>
- Forkey, H., Griffin, J. L., & Szilagyi, M. (2021). *Childhood trauma & resilience: A practical guide*. American Academy of Pediatrics.



# References

- Gunderson, R. L., Mrozla-Toscano, C. F., & Mao, D. M. (2023). An instructor's guide for implementing trauma-informed pedagogy in higher education. *Trauma-Informed Pedagogy in Faculty Development*, 37(2), 80 – 86. <https://go.openathens.net/redirector/liberty.edu?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/instructors-guide-implementing-trauma-informed/docview/2810213085/se-2>
- Houston, H. (2022, December 2). A brief look at the brain affected by trauma. Stress & Anxiety Center. <https://anxiety-stresscenter.com/a-brief-look-at-the-brain-affected-by-trauma/>
- Imad, M. (2022). Our brains, emotions, and learning: Eight principles of trauma-informed teaching. In P. Thompson & J. Carello (Eds.), *Trauma-informed pedagogies: A guide for responding to crisis and inequality in higher education*. Springer Nature.
- Lipson, S. K., Zhou, S., Abelson, S., Heinze, J., Jirsa, M., Morigney, J., Patterson, A., Singh, M., & Eisenberg, D. (2022). Trends in college student mental health and help-seeking by race/ethnicity: Findings from the National Healthy Minds study, 2013-2021. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 306, 138-147. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2022.03.038>
- Newport Institute. (2022, June 17). Big T vs. little t trauma in young adults: Is there a difference? Newport Institute. <https://www.newportinstitute.com/resources/mental-health/big-t-little-t-trauma/#:~:text=In%20addition%2C%20acute%20psychological%20traumas,but%20do%20create%20significant%20distress.>

# References

- PACEsConnection. (n.d.). Understanding ACEs [Educational handout]. PACEsConnection. <https://www.pacesconnection.com/pages/UnderstandingACEs>
- Radis, B., Crocetto, J., & Beemer, K. (2020). Incorporating trauma-informed educational practice into baccalaureate social work classroom. *The Journal of Baccalaureate Social Work*, 25(1), 31-44. <https://doi.org/10.18084/1084-7219.25.1.31>
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2014). SAMHSA's concept of trauma and guidance for a trauma-informed approach. SAMHSA. <https://store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/sma14-4884.pdf>
- Uhernik, J. A. (2017). *Using neuroscience in trauma therapy: Creative and compassionate counseling*. Routledge.
- Wuest, D. A., & Subramaniam, P. R. (2022). Preparing trauma-informed future educators. *Strategies*, 35(5), 16-20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08924562.2022.2100535>





thank you

DINA WARREN

[DKW15B@ACU.EDU](mailto:DKW15B@ACU.EDU)

HARDIN ADMIN BUILDING, ROOM 311C

