

Iowa School Counselor Association Conference

Understanding and Responding to Trauma within the School System

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Why do we do this work?

- Discuss your answer to this question with a partner
- Think of your story and what led you here
- Pick a word that embodies your answer to this question

Session description

- This session will focus on providing participants with information about neuroscience and the influence of trauma on childhood development. We will explore how different types of trauma impact students in the classroom and how school counselors can identify and support these students. Evidence-based strategies such as mindfulness, creative arts, and yoga will be discussed. Participants will have an opportunity to try some of the interventions - wear comfortable clothing.

Trauma statistics

3,476,000 children were reported to authorities for investigation in 2019 (latest data available)

656,000 children were determined to be victims of maltreatment

Most common maltreatment was neglect (61%), followed by physical abuse (10.3%)

Estimate of 1,840 children died from abuse and neglect in 2019

20% to 48% of all youth were exposed to multiple types of victimization and trauma

(Department of Health & Human Services, 2021)

defining trauma

“Any threatening, overwhelming experiences that we cannot integrate. . . After such experiences, we are often left with a diminished sense of security with others and in the world, and a sense of feeling unsafe inside our own skin” (Ogden, 2015, p. 66)

However, trauma is not really about the “event” but the reaction/effect

Integration is “the linkage of differentiated elements of a system”
(Siegel & Bryson, 2011, p. 64)

Integration and Disintegration

Integration happens in a variety of systems. Inside of our bodies, it takes place when our left and right hemispheres of the brain communicate or parallels are drawn between thoughts and physical sensations.

Disintegration occurs when our thoughts, memories, and emotions become cut off from our experience or continually flood our field of consciousness. We become out of balance and unable to trust our senses. The connection between body and mind is impacted or severed.

(Treleaven, 2018)

Barriers to Integration

1. Fear- we become terrified of our internal experience. We don't trust our bodies and are afraid of the persistent, recurring sensations and emotions tied to the trauma.

2. Shame- often accompanies traumatic stress. It is a complex and debilitating emotion.

(Treleaven, 2018)

Trauma today

There is an urgent need to recognize the trauma endured by Black communities and other communities of color that face systemic racism, violence, and oppression

- Intergenerational trauma (5 or 6 generations back)
- Experiences of racial discrimination fueled generalized anxiety disorder

Influence of a pandemic



It's more than their “story”

- Historically, we (educators) focus on the child's story as a means of understanding their behavior
- We sometimes get caught up in the narrative instead of supporting and understanding the effect of that event on the child.
- We don't always get to know the story- but we do see the story's lingering effects.
- A focus on the effects might help us better monitor the child and help us to see the whole student as more than their story
- (Souers & Hall, 2016)

Adverse Childhood Experiences

- Large scale study from the 1990's- correlation of negative factors from childhood on health-risk behaviors
- 3 types of ACES: abuse, neglect, & household dysfunction
- Has received some criticism due to narrow participant demographics, In addition, it should not be used as a standardized measure of childhood exposure to stress- nor a diagnostic screening or assessment tool
- Has led to a movement to look more at resilience and the importance of protective factors
- Expanded ACE questionnaire:
https://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/violence/activities/adverse_childhood_experiences/questionnaire.pdf?ua=1

Table 2. Examination of the original ACE questionnaire and the resulting ACE-aware movement

Benefits	Limitations
Increases public awareness of the potential long-term negative impacts of cumulative early adverse events.	Limited generalizability to children and adolescents and non-White individuals.
Provides scientific evidence linking experiences and environment with biology and physiology.	Does not account for individual-level factors (e.g., chronicity, genetic predispositions, age, gender, perception of support) that influence response to and impact of stressors.
Sparks curiosity for new ways of understanding distress and ways to heal.	Non-inclusive of many significant childhood stressors (e.g., systemic racism, death of a parent, bullying, natural disaster).
Decreases blame and shame around struggles (e.g., conceptualized as a result of experiences and environment, not personal weakness or fault).	Overemphasis on a number (score) can decrease individuals' sense of personal agency and hope for the future, ignoring context and resilience factors.
Motivates action for change, with a particular emphasis on relationships as facilitative of resilience.	Not a valid or reliable screening or diagnostic instrument.
Provides a public health framework for prevention and intervention efforts.	Does not have individual-level predictive validity.

(Miller, 2021)

Neurophysiology of Trauma



- Understanding how the body and brain respond to trauma
- From a neurodevelopment perspective- these early adverse experiences are considered “violations in the expectable environment” (P. 133; Nelson & Gabard-Durnam, 2020))
- The expected environment is one with **trusted** and supportive human relationships
- When born into environments that lack these relationships= brains have to work harder to adapt in an atypical manner
- This “**relational poverty**” In the first two months of life is the strongest predictor for negative neurodevelopmental and behavior outcomes
- Affects attachment and stress response
- (Miller, 2021)

- All of this affects the brain's plasticity- the ability of the nervous system to change it's activity in response to intrinsic or extrinsic stimuli
- Consider which parts of the brain are being strengthened and developed- the survival mode or relationship development
- When a baby has a sense of safety- it can build on the connections with caregivers- all of this contributes to ongoing development of perspective-taking, ability to use empathy, ability to focus and pay attention, and emotional regulation
- For most children who experience adversity experiences multiple instances over long periods, impacting multiple sensitive and critical periods with major impacts on neural circuitry.
- (Miller, 2021)

Short video clip from Dr. Bruce Perry

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hp6fZrzgiHg>
- Psychiatrist who looks at the impact of trauma on neurodevelopment
- Part of the Child Trauma Academy
- His website: <https://www.bdperry.com/>

What's up with the Amygdala?

- It's function is to identify and affectively learn about important events in the environment that are emotionally important or motivationally relevant
- Known as the “smoke detector” of the brain. The amygdala is very sensitive to environmental clues of threat or safety during late infancy and childhood.
- When danger is detected, it signals the threat response system via the sympathetic nervous system (fight, flight, or freeze)- cortisol released
- Lack of parental presence to help regulate threat or the parent being the source of the distress can result in over-excitation of the amygdala and establish a chronic state of affective dysregulation

(Miller, 2021)

How this shows up in the classroom

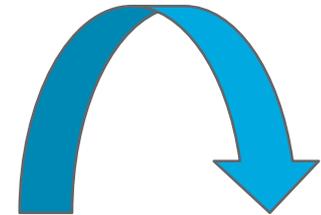
- The student who seems to explode or become aggressive for no apparent reason
- The fight, flight, or freeze response is a physiological response to a perceived threat.
- What you might see:
 - Blowing up
 - Defiance
 - Fighting (especially when criticized or teased)
 - Resisting transitions or change
 - Usually protective of personal space
 - Reverting to younger behavior
 - Frequently seeking attention
 - Distrust of adults in authority

(Bashant, 2020)



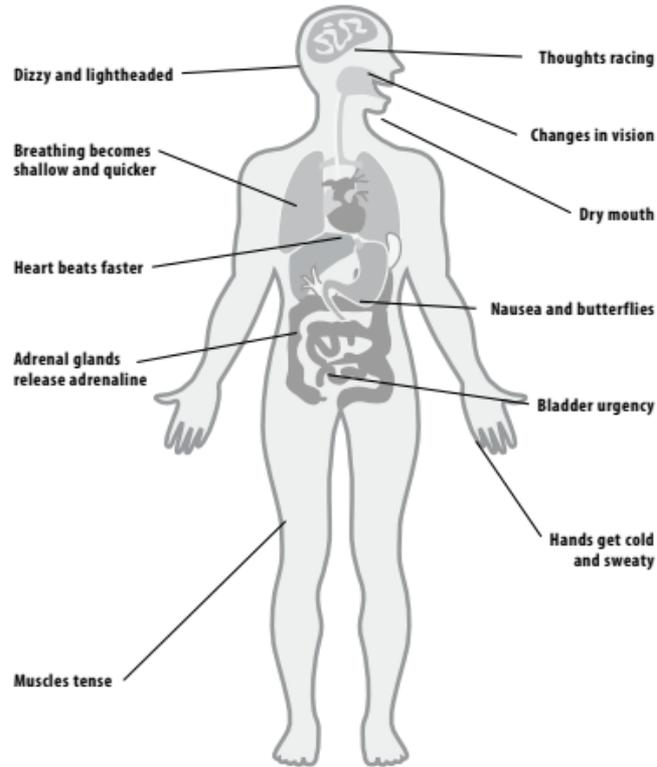
How can school counselors respond

- Look for any predictable cycles in the student's behavior. Activation of the body's stress response begins with a trigger (something that led them to feel unsafe or emotionally dysregulated). After triggered, there is a period of agitation
- As agitation builds, it leads to an acceleration phase until they are in the peak of the stress response
- After the peak of the stress response, they enter the de-escalation phase until they are in recovery phase.
- Ask the child to describe the physical sensations experienced



My Body's Response to Stress

What do you notice in your body when you become angry, frustrated, scared, or overwhelmed? Our bodies give us warning signals that we are becoming stressed. Circle any areas on the body where you can feel your warning signals.



Go over these with a teacher or caregiver and let them know which ones you experience.

Remember . . .

- Neuroplasticity- the ability of the brain to form and reorganize synaptic connections, especially in response to learning or experience
- First- recognize that we can have a life-changing impact on students by helping them learn and practice new behaviors and skills- this will help them respond adaptively
- What else . .

Create Safety

If the child is overwhelmed, perhaps guide them to a quiet corner or allow them to decompress by visiting the restroom. If you are in a classroom, maybe you have a peace corner that you've outfitted with blankets or a screen so that it feels like a safe place. (ECHO, 2017)



Build a Connected Relationship

- This is the number one way to regulate the nervous system. When we are around people we care about, our bodies produce oxytocin, which is the hormone responsible for calming our nervous system after stress. If we stay connected, then eventually the calm discussion of each person's feelings and needs can take place. (ECHO, 2017)
- Dr. Dan Siegel on Mwe: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u08Yo4UE6g0>

Support Development of Coherent Narrative

- Creating predictability through structure, routines and the presence of reliable adults helps reduce the chaos a child may feel and allows them to start creating the kind of logical sequential connections that not only help them understand their own narrative, but are also the fundamental requirement of many types of learning. (ECHO, 2017)



Practice ‘power-with’ Strategies

- One of the hallmarks of trauma is a loss of power and control. When someone is wielding power over you with no regard to your thoughts or feelings, the toxic shame of the original trauma may come flooding back. As adults, we should use our power well. If we model a ‘power-with’ relationship with children it’s our best chance of creating adults who will treat others with dignity and respect. (ECHO, 2017)



Build Social Emotional and Resiliency Skills

- Trauma robs us of time spent developing social and emotional skills. The brain is too occupied with survival to devote much of its energy to learning how to build relationships and it's a good chance we didn't see those skills modeled for us. Learning to care for one another is the most important job we have growing up. (ECHO, 2017)

Foster Post-traumatic Growth

- We know that there are qualities and skills that allow people to overcome the most devastating trauma and not just survive but find new purpose and meaning in their lives. Problem solving, planning, maintaining focus despite discomfort, self-control and seeking support are all known to lead to post-traumatic growth and are skills we can foster in children. (ECHO, 2017)

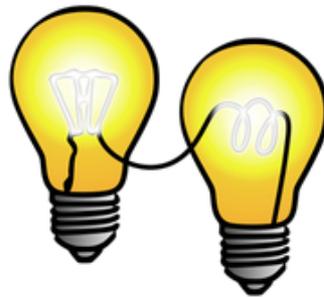


Current Self-regulation Strategies

- Assess what the student is currently doing to regulate their emotions and self-soothe
 - Are they adaptive strategies (meditation, exercise, reading)?
 - These have a neutral or positive impact on the individual and those around them
 - Are they nonadaptive self-regulation strategies (using substances, yelling, fighting)?
 - These have a negative impact on oneself or others

Working with the Self-Regulation Strategies

- Examine any nonadaptive strategies they are using
- Determine the purpose that each strategy serves
- Work collaboratively with the student to select an adaptive strategy to replace the nonadaptive strategy
- Explicitly teach each adaptive strategy and encourage their use





DOs AND DON'Ts OF A TRAUMA-INFORMED COMPASSIONATE CLASSROOM



1 CREATE A SAFE SPACE

Consider not only physical safety but the children's emotional safety as well.

1

2

2 ESTABLISH PREDICTABILITY

Write out a schedule and prepare children for transitions. It helps create a sense of security and safety.



3 BUILD A SENSE OF TRUST

Follow through with your promises and in situations where changes are unavoidable be transparent with your explanations.

3

4

4 OFFER CHOICES

Empower students and offer "power with" rather than "power over" strategies.



5 STAY REGULATED

Help your students (and yourself!) stay in the "Resiliency Zone" to promote optimum learning. Have regulation tools ready to help students bumped out of the zone into either hyperarousal (angry, nervous, panicky) or hypoarousal (numb, depressed, fatigued).

5



There's really only one **DON'T**
Let's not punish kids for behaviors that are trauma symptoms.



Within the classroom (strategies for teachers)

- Consider your mindset- embracing a feeling of curiosity about what is happening with the child may change your approach
- Try a collaborative vs. punitive discipline approach
- Use a strengths-based vs. problem-focused mindset
- Using mindful communication- consider all the ways you are communicating with students (verbally and non-verbally) and keep that awareness, these students are hypervigilant and sensitive to the adults around them
- Consider restorative practices- these emphasize relationship-building and repairing rather than punishing

(Bashant, 2020)

**The Most Important Take-away
from today**

Defining mindfulness

“Paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally”

(Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p.4)

What does this really mean?

A little history

Modern interpretations of mindfulness have roots in Buddhist philosophies and can be described as the “path to discovering the true nature of our existence”.

Four foundations (to developing mindfulness):

1. Body
2. Feelings or sensations
3. Mind
4. Dharma (doing the right thing and doing it all the time)

(Treleaven, 2018)

*note about pushback, cultural appropriation, and a secular approach

Connection to Self-Regulation

Mindfulness can also be considered a process of enhanced self-regulation

While practicing mindfulness, our ability to self-regulate is heightened, ultimately enabling us to respond to the world in flexible and adaptive ways

However . . .

By practicing mindfulness and paying attention to their moment-to-moment experience- it is likely they will encounter traumatic stimuli (images, memories, feelings, etc)

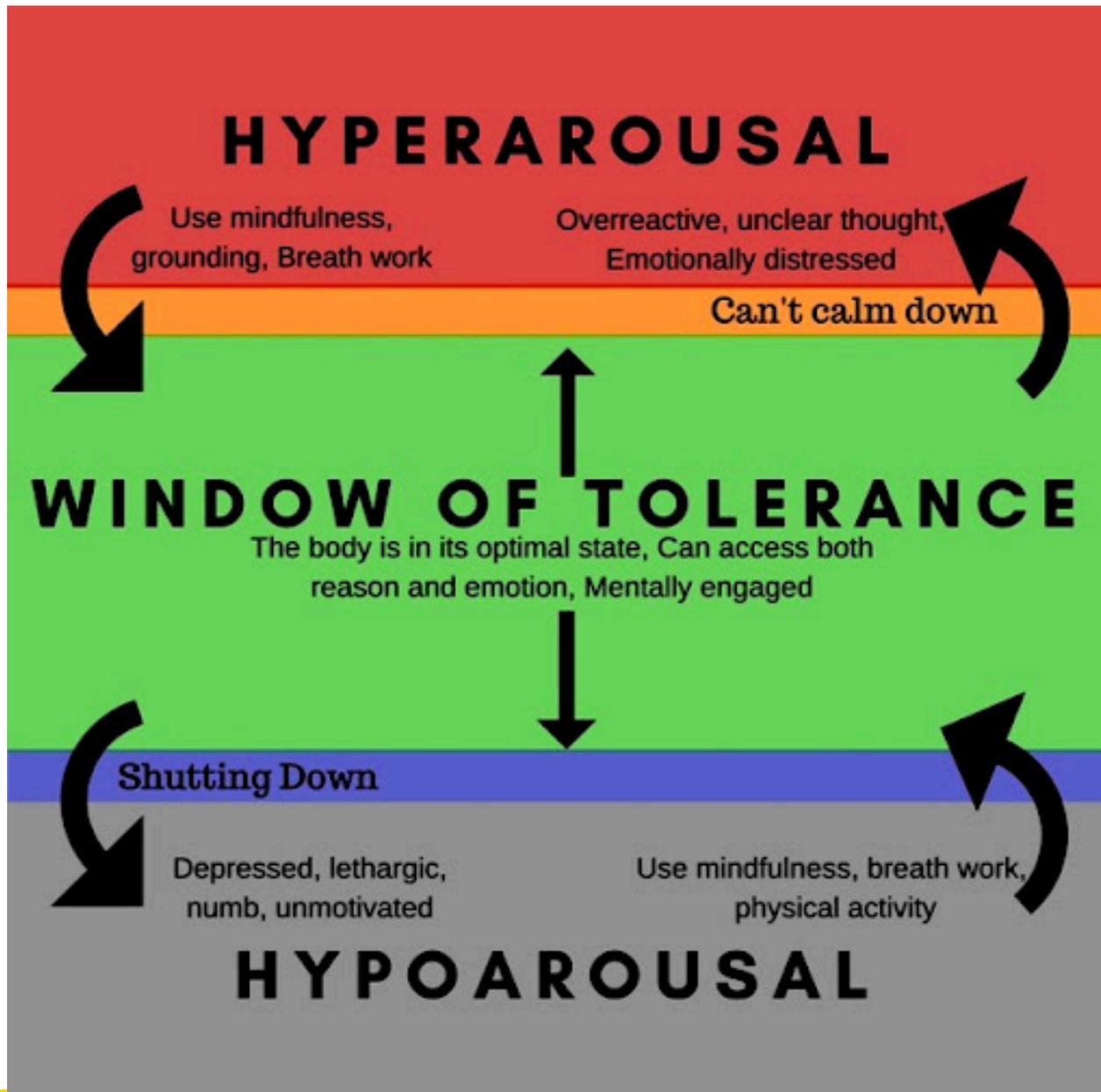
This can be good news IF they are adequately prepared.
Becoming aware of the stimuli is the first step toward addressing it

So, survivors need tools to stabilize themselves and navigate their symptoms

Trauma-Sensitive Mindfulness

5 Principles

1. Stay within the Window of Tolerance
2. Shift attention to support stability
3. Keep the body in mind
4. Practice in relationship: supporting safety and stability
5. Understand social context- trust and understanding another's persons world (i.e. social identity)



Let's try some!

- Mindfulness
- Creative strategies
- Yoga



Creative Activities

- Draw your Hand (5 things you can see, 4 things you can touch, 3 things you can hear, 2 things you can smell, 1 thing you can taste)



Other activities

Breathing activity

Walking meditation

Guided imagery



RESOURCES

- Positive & Adverse Childhood Experiences website:
<https://www.pacesconnection.com/>
- Child Trauma Academy- <https://www.childtrauma.org/>
- ECHO: <https://www.echotraining.org/>
- American SPCC: https://americanspcc.org/learning-center/?gclid=Cj0KCQjw8eOLBhC1ARIsAOzx5cF4iFP1kv-o0QI9TG7MUc4-HahyPaECGzItbQq1ICG2xMkpS4EW6DoaAhDcEALw_wcB
- National Child Traumatic Stress Network:
<https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/about-child-trauma>

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