

# Trauma-informed teaching

## WHAT IS THIS RESOURCE?

A compilation of teaching techniques and strategies that can minimize unproductive stress in students and support students who are dealing with trauma.

## HOW DO I USE IT?

Review the suggested practices and reflect on how to incorporate them into your teaching. For assistance, please contact [the USC Center for Excellence in Teaching](http://cet.usc.edu/).

### What is trauma-informed teaching?

Trauma can be defined as “the body’s protective response to an event - or a series of events - that it perceives as potentially dangerous.” (Menakem, 2018) Danger in this sense may refer to either physical and/or mental harm. Trauma-informed teaching then is a set of practices that acknowledges the existence of (or potential existence of) students’ trauma and attempts to minimize its impact on student learning and development.

### Why practice trauma-informed teaching?

Attending to students’ trauma can be supported through a purely ethical argument: we should help others with their trauma as ethical human beings. Instructors have further evidence-supported and professional reasons to manage students’ trauma: an extensive body of research demonstrates that stress, particularly chronic stress, can impair the human cognitive processes of memory retention, memory recall, decision-making, attention, motivation, and executive functioning. (Domes & Frings, 2020; Cibrian-Llanderal & Hernandez-Baltazar, 2018; Morgado & Cerqueira, 2018; Sandi, 2013) Relaxation, in contrast, can increase divergent (or creative) thinking (Meier et al., 2020).

Academic-related stress has also been correlated with long-term effects such as impaired mental health, substance abuse, poor sleep (Pascoe et al., 2020), and reduced overall quality of life (Ribeiro et al., 2018).

Since students’ trauma can interfere with their achievement of course learning objectives, diminishing the effects of trauma is one tool for achieving our instructional goals. Of course, instructors cannot know all the traumas or stressors experienced by students, and the events that trigger individual students’ traumas are sometimes unpredictable. Trauma-informed teaching therefore comprises a set of techniques and strategies aimed toward reducing unproductive stress and trauma in all students.

### Trauma-informed teaching practices

#### Promote community and belonging

Encouraging a feeling of connection between a student and their instructor and peers can counterbalance feelings of disconnection and isolation from trauma.

* Explicitly discuss the importance of working together as a learning community.
* Declare your intention to create an inclusive learning environment.
* Be personable with students. Demonstrate professionally-appropriate interest in students’ lives and concerns.
* Plan opportunities for students to get to know each other, such as through icebreakers, small-group activities, and group projects.
* Use students’ names in class and ask students how to correctly pronounce their names. Use students’ self-identified pronouns. Have students display their self-identified names and pronouns in their Zoom video feed (for Zoom sessions) or on table tents (in the physical classroom).
* Provide or co-develop a set of behavioral expectations (discussion norms) for your course. CET has resources on discussion norms with suggested wordings. For example, “Let other people speak. Once you are done speaking, let at least two other people talk before you speak again.” and “Criticize ideas, rather than individuals.”
* Provide a context or process for challenging statements that could be considered offensive or harmful to students.
* Allow students to see you acknowledging your own mistakes. Promote a growth mindset, which accepts mistakes as necessary and normal in the path toward improvement.
* Ask students to reach out if they have a difficulty or concern. Advise students how you want them to contact you outside of class.
* Offer information on student support services if they are not comfortable coming to you, such as [Campus Support and Intervention](https://campussupport.usc.edu/) or [Office of the Ombuds](https://ombuds.usc.edu/).
* Ask for student feedback throughout the semester to proactively identify student concerns.

#### Provide clarity and transparency

Reduce uncertainty to help foster a sense of safety because uncertainty and confusion increase stress. There are some situations in which we want students to manage ambiguity, but otherwise ambiguity interferes with instructional goals.

* Provide an agenda for each class session, including the class’s learning objectives.
* Provide students with detailed assignment descriptions. Use rubrics and provide them with the corresponding assignment descriptions. Rubrics not only help instructors to grade more consistently and effectively, but also help guide students toward their best work and allow them to self-assess.
* Let students know class topics in advance, particularly topics that are likely to interact with students’ possible traumas. Some examples: racism, rape, assault, disturbing images. Consider a course, department, or school policy on student requests for opting out of triggering topics.
* Include course policies in the syllabus, including policies on late work, missed classes and exams, and use of electronic devices in class.
* Include links to campus resources in the syllabus. The last section of [the Curriculum Coordination Office’s syllabus template](https://arr.usc.edu/forms/USC-Syllabus-Template.docx) provides the most up-to-date support listings. Remind students of [available campus resources](https://studentaffairs.usc.edu/) throughout the semester.

#### Offer flexibility

Students experiencing trauma or stress may respond unpredictably. Providing students options and autonomy can help them navigate through traumatic periods while also maintaining educational goals.

* Provide students autonomy when appropriate and consistent with instructional goals. Example: provide an asynchronous alternative to in-person class attendance.
* Create a policy allowing students to “drop” a specific number of grades, such as for in-class work, assignments, or quizzes, without justification.
* Allow students choice in assignments. Example: allow students to submit work in their choice of medium (essay, video, PowerPoint, podcast) if the medium is not the focus of the assignment. Example: let students choose their specific essay topic within a set of options or with your approval.
* Encourage students to share with you official accommodation letters from the Office of Student Accessibility Services (OSAS), and ask students to contact OSAS if they require accommodations. Comply fully with all OSAS accommodation letters.

### Resources

Cibrian-Llanderal, T., & Hernandez-Baltazar, M. M.-G. and D. (2018). Stress and Cognition: Psychological Basis and Support Resources. In *Health and Academic Achievement*. IntechOpen. https://doi.org/10.5772/intechopen.72566

Domes, G., & Frings, C. (2020). Stress and cognition in humans: Current findings and open questions in experimental psychology. *Experimental Psychology*, *67*(2), 73–76. http://dx.doi.org.libproxy2.usc.edu/10.1027/1618-3169/a000476

Meier, M., Unternaehrer, E., Schorpp, S. M., Wenzel, M., Benz, A., Bentele, U. U., Dimitroff, S. J., Denk, B., & Prüssner, J. C. (2020). The Opposite of Stress: The Relationship Between Vagal Tone, Creativity, and Divergent Thinking. *Experimental Psychology*, *67*(2), 150–159. https://doi.org/10.1027/1618-3169/a000483

Menakem, R. (2018, September 17). *White Supremacy as a Trauma Response*. Medium. https://medium.com/@rmenakem/white-supremacy-as-a-trauma-response-ce631b82b975

Pascoe, M. C., Hetrick, S. E., & Parker, A. G. (2020). The impact of stress on students in secondary school and higher education. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, *25*(1), 104–112. https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2019.1596823

Ribeiro, Í. J. S., Pereira, R., Freire, I. V., de Oliveira, B. G., Casotti, C. A., & Boery, E. N. (2018). Stress and Quality of Life Among University Students: A Systematic Literature Review. *Health Professions Education*, *4*(2), 70–77. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hpe.2017.03.002

Sandi, C. (2013). Stress and cognition: Stress and cognition. *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Cognitive Science*, *4*(3), 245–261. https://doi.org/10.1002/wcs.1222

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