

Developing a Trauma-Responsive Classroom

Around 85% of people report having exposure to at least one lifetime traumatic event by the time they reach college-age (Cless & Goff, 2017). Due to these high rates, it is likely that you will encounter students suffering from the long-term impacts of trauma in your courses. While trauma-survivorship is an invisible identity, it does negatively impact students' ability to learn (Misawa & Giffin, in press).

Trauma can manifest in many different ways, including **increased dissociation, feelings of hopelessness, hypervigilance, and emotional overwhelm** (Averoff, 2017). These manifestations can make it difficult for students to keep track of changes in the class, make decisions about their learning, maintain motivation to study, prioritize assignments, manage their time, and engage with classmates and class material.

Therefore, **it is important to take steps to create a trauma-responsive learning environment**. This document provides some strategies for designing and implementing a trauma-responsive classroom.

Lifetime traumatic events include, but are not limited to the following experiences:

- Sexual assault
- Hate crimes
- Racism
- Bullying
- Physical abuse
- Loss of a loved one
- Witnessing community of domestic violence
- Intergenerational trauma
- COVID-19

There are two things that you should consider when engaging in trauma-responsive teaching: the components of trauma-responsive teaching and trauma-responsive teaching strategies.

COMPONENTS OF TRAUMA-RESPONSIVE TEACHING

- 1** Provide a safer space for student-survivors to learn, heal, and grow
- 2** Recognize that trauma-survivorship is a marginalized and invisible identity cultivated through the shared experience of trauma, suppression, and oppression
- 3** Learn about trauma-survivors' lived experiences
- 4** Be aware of how traumatic course material are presented and included

TRAUMA-RESPONSIVE TEACHING STRATEGIES

There are several strategies to employ when practicing trauma-responsive teaching. Some of those strategies are:

- Make students aware of potentially difficult course content early in the semester and remind them again before the actual class
- Acknowledge that the sensitive topics being covered are difficult and be available for students
- Learn as much as you can about trauma-survivorship as a sociocultural identity and build a working knowledge base of the challenges survivor-students face
- Do not shy away from difficult topics
- Be flexible with your assignments and participation requirements
- Share self-care strategies with your students*
- Implement a “three-wishes” policy that allows students to revise/resubmit their work, attend class remotely, or have an excused absence - no questions asked*
- Create a “safe space” in your classroom where students can go to calm down when they are stressed or triggered*
- Normalize asking for help when it is needed*
- Assume that anyone could be a trauma survivor and choose your words carefully*

Creating a safer space for trauma survivor-students will help to develop a classroom culture of respect and empathy, which will increase everyone’s learning.

REFERENCES

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