

Toolkit

Trauma-Informed Strategies to Help Students Feel Safe and Supported



Introduction

Trauma-Informed Education

It's safe to say that at one point or another, all of us have felt stress in our lives. But what makes everyday stress different from trauma?

Trauma refers to an event that overwhelms our ability to cope and respond. When we experience trauma, we feel helpless, hopeless, and out of control. A person is traumatized when they can't bring their mind and body back into balance after the event is over. In other words, if you experience a stressful event that you do not recover from, then that event is traumatic.

Trauma may be one incident or an ongoing event that occurs over time. While most people will experience a traumatic event, the effects will vary from person to person. Traumatic events can happen at any age and have an effect at any time, even long after the event.

As a source of long-term stress, trauma that remains unresolved can impact our physical, emotional, mental and behavioral state. For people who have experienced trauma, there can be long-lasting, chronic effects on how they think, feel, and behave, as well as on their overall health.



More than two-thirds of youth report at least one traumatic event by age 16, which can affect mental and physical health for years after the event. For school-aged children, traumatic experiences can lead to affecting cognitive strengths and the ability for them to engage in educational situations. Streeck-Fischer and van der Kolk's (2000) research on traumatized abused children found they were affected by various developmental factors such as their "speech problems interfere with understanding complex situations and the narration of complex stories. Many have limited capacity to comprehend complex visual-spatial patterns. This, in turn, leads to problems with reading and writing" (Sweetman, 2). In addition, "children who experience trauma may also demonstrate difficulties in school related to attention and emotional regulation, language processing, and academic learning" (Matthews, 2).

Introduction

Educator Wellness



Not having training or tools to support students who have had trauma can result in educators and school staff experiencing compassion fatigue, or how educators internalize or absorb their students' trauma to the point of emotional and even physical exhaustion (Walker, 1). Compassion fatigue can be a gradual process and often leads to burnout.

Symptoms of compassion fatigue may include "fatigue, loss of interest in helping others, and heightened feelings of hopelessness," as well as sleep disturbances, increased emotional intensity, difficulty in cognition and impaired behavior and judgement (Walker, 6). Unfortunately, many educators are "not trained to respond to students who disclose personal crises or to effectively manage emotions that get triggered when such disclosures occur in the classroom" (Carello & Butler, 267).

Understanding how trauma shows up in the brain, and in the body, allows us to address its symptoms, such as depression and anxiety, through trauma-informed education. When educators are trauma-informed and receive the support they need, they are better equipped to identify and navigate trauma when it shows up in the classroom.

To be trauma-informed is to recognize trauma when it shows up and provide strategies to support students who have experienced trauma. "The foundation of a 'trauma-informed classroom' is an understanding by teachers of the daily circumstances of their pupils' lives and awareness of what trauma-based reactions and behaviors look like. The rituals and teaching methods of the classroom may be modified in response to the pupils' needs, in consultation with them, and a system of ongoing feedback" (Sweetman, 1).

In this toolkit, you will gain 10 trauma-informed, SEL-aligned strategies that can be integrated into your classroom and school community.



Calm Zones and Peace Corners

SEL*F Component: Settle In or Relaxation

CASEL Competency: Self Management & Self Awareness

Purpose: For students to self-regulate and recenter

Materials: Pillows, cushions, bean bag chair, rocking chair, blanket, stuffed animals, squishy balls, headphones, music

Instructions

1. Create a space where students can voluntarily move when they feel themselves getting out of control or having a difficult time.
2. Offer optional soothing furniture and comfort items in that space that are developmentally appropriate for the students you teach.
3. Students can choose to go there without consequence.
4. This space is available to all students who may be having a tough time.

Reflection Questions

What do you notice about your students before, during, and after time in the Calm Zones and Peace Corners?

How has this space positively impacted your interactions with the students who have used it?



Teaching Tip

Throughout the day, allow students to go to the corner as needed so that they can have time to themselves to readjust. Students can be given a timer so that the space is available for other students.

Belly Breathing

SEL*F Component: Breath Awareness

CASEL Competency: Self-Management

Purpose: Focuses the mind, regulates the body, and builds inner strength.

Instructions

1. Find a comfortable seated position. Lengthen your spine, open your heart, and rest your shoulders down your back. Take a breath in and a breath out. Notice the quality of your breath (e.g., temperature, rhythm, length, etc.). Pay attention to where your breath is moving throughout your body. We are going to experiment with breathing into two different places: our chest and our belly.
2. First, place both hands on your upper chest. Open your mouth and breathe in, noticing your chest puff up and fill with air. Now, breathe out, letting the air go.
3. Next, you have the option to either place both hands on your belly OR place your hands on either side of your ribcage. Slowly breathe in through your nose, and fill your belly up with air. Notice your belly puffing out. If your hands are on your ribcage, feel your ribs expanding as you breathe in. Now, breathe out, noticing your belly coming back in toward your body. Those with your hands on your ribcage, feel your ribs come back towards your body.
4. What differences do you notice between chest breathing and the breathing you chose today? (Chest breathing can feel constricted or stressed, while belly or ribcage breathing feels calming). Let's try chest breathing and then one of the other breathing techniques one more time each.
5. As you belly or ribcage breathe, feel your stomach or ribs move out and in. Feel free to close your eyes if it feels safe. Take a moment to notice any subtle changes happening in your mind and body. When you breathe deeply like this, your diaphragm sends calming signals to your brain through the vagus nerve, which reduces stress. Deep breathing also slows the heart rate and calms nerves.
6. Know that you can always return to this type of breathing whenever you need to recenter or calm yourself, or when you want to feel more at peace.

Reflection Questions

How did you feel at the beginning of the breathing exercise? At the end?

Did you notice any changes in your mind and/or body?

When can you use belly or ribcage breathing to help you?



Teaching Tip: Emotional Release

Students who have experienced, or are currently experiencing, extreme stress in their lives tend to have shortened breath. Be mindful of where students hold tension in their bodies; it may not feel natural for some students to breathe up into their chests or down into their bellies yet.



Growth Mindset Vision Board

SEL*F Component: Creative Expression

CASEL Competency: Responsible Decision-Making

Purpose: Growth mindset, ignite imagination, goal setting, resilience.

Materials: Magazines, textured materials, a variety of school craft objects, printouts, scissors, glue, and large poster boards or canvases

Instructions

1. Have a conversation with students about their goals, dreams, and the idea that they can achieve them with effort. For students who find it challenging to think into the future, reassure them and allow them to focus on short-term goals, creating a board for the week, month, or year.
2. Search for images, quotes, and words in magazines or online that relate to their goals and a growth mindset.
3. Support students, as needed, with arranging and gluing the chosen content onto the poster board or canvas, creating a visually inspiring collage.
4. Encourage students to reflect on their board regularly, visualizing their goals and the steps they need to take.



Teaching Tip

Allow students to focus on areas outside of school as well as their academic lives, such as friends, family, hobbies, careers. If students need more time, provide it for them as needed to allow them to fully connect with the process.

Reflection Questions

How did students demonstrate resilience when working on their boards?

How did you experience yourself while supporting your students?



Peaceful Place

SEL*F Component: Relaxation

CASEL Competency: Self-Awareness, Self-Management

Purpose: Calms the mind, increases happiness, and supports independence.

Instructions

1. Take a comfortable seated or reclined position. Let your legs relax out long, and your arms rest on the ground, with palms facing up. Keep a soft gaze or close your eyes.
2. Begin to connect to your breath. Inhale, "I breathe in." Exhale, "I breathe out." Notice how your body changes with each inhale and exhale.
3. As you continue to relax and deepen your breath, begin to imagine your Peaceful Place - a beautiful, present, safe place that was created just for you. You are the only person in the world who can decide what is in it, and its only purpose is to help you relax and feel happy.
4. Visualize yourself walking into your Peaceful Place. Where is it? What does it look like inside your special place? What are you doing in there?
5. What sounds do you hear? Notice all the wonderful things about your safe, Peaceful Place.
6. Now, notice how being in this Peaceful Place is making you feel right now. Where can you feel these emotions in your body?
7. Let's take 3 collective breaths to soak in all the good energy we've gotten from being in this space so we can carry it with us for the rest of the day.
8. Now, silently thank your Peaceful Place for helping you relax and feel better, and say goodbye for now. Know that this calming space is always here for you to return to when you need it.
9. Slowly bring movement back into your body by wiggling your fingers and toes. Bring your arms above your head for a full-body stretch.

Reflection Questions

When would it be helpful to return to your Peaceful Place?

How did you feel before you entered your Peaceful Place?

How did your feelings change during/after spending time in your Peaceful Place?



Teaching Tip: Emotional Release

Provide students the option of writing about their Peaceful Place, answering prompts about their Peaceful Place, or drawing their Peaceful Place.



Gesturing

SEL*F Component: Creative Expression and Mindful Movement

CASEL Competency: Self-Awareness

Purpose: Connects elevated emotions with the body, resilience

Materials: Music playlist with different tempos, open space



Instructions

1. Gather students in the space (can be a circle, students can choose their spots, in rows, let them decide how to be in the space) where they can stretch out their arms to create space around themselves.
2. Invite students to close their eyes (or gaze at a spot on the floor) and conjure a memory that makes them feel good.
3. Ask them to notice how it feels in their body.
4. Inform them that music will start playing and they are to move however the elevated (good) emotion would move. Provide options, such as:
 - You can move like your favorite color.
 - You can move like a sunny day.
 - You can move like the ocean.
 - You can move like the wind.
5. Change the music/tempo 3-4 times.
6. After the last song, ask students to turn and talk to share what the emotion was that they were moving as.



Teaching Tip

If students are having a difficult time identifying a memory where they had a good feeling or good feelings in general, provide prompts such as, “think about a time when you received a compliment,” “think about a time when you enjoyed a conversation,” “think about a time you had fun with a friend.”

Reflection Questions

How did you feel as a good emotion?

Are there times that you can use this movement to support you? Responses don't need to be explicit, yes/no is okay

What are some other good emotions you can create movement for?



Calm Bottle

SEL*F Component: Focus

CASEL Competency: Self-Awareness, Responsible Decision-Making

Purpose: Calms the body, enhances focus, and regulates emotions.

Materials: Calm Bottle

Instructions

1. Circle up and settle into a comfortable seated position.
2. Introduce Calm Bottle-This is our Calm Bottle. It has glitter and water in it and can help us find stillness in our minds when we feel stressed, upset, angry, or afraid.
3. Right now, the glitter is settled at the bottom of the bottle. Notice what the water is like. When are our minds like this? (Collective Reflection). Our minds are settled like this when we feel present and relaxed.
4. Let's shake it up! Notice what is happening to the water and glitter now. What is changing? When is our mind like this? (Collective Reflection). When we feel really worried, upset, angry, or afraid, our thoughts whirl around in our minds just like the glitter is whirling around in the bottle. When our minds spin like this, it is much harder for us to learn and focus.
5. Let's place the bottle down and mindfully observe what happens to the water and glitter when we let it be.
6. What do you notice happening? (Collective Reflection).
7. We have the power to settle our minds like this too. When we have a lot of thoughts whirling around our minds, we can pause, take some deep breaths, and wait as the thoughts begin to settle down. The Calm Bottle can help us with this. When your thoughts are swirling, simply shake up the bottle, and then watch as the glitter slowly settles. As the glitter in the Calm Bottle settles, so will the thoughts in your mind!

Reflection Questions

How did you feel when the glitter was whirling around really fast?

How did the Calm Bottle help you to settle your thoughts?

Secondary teachers, how might you modify this practice with your students?



Teaching Tip: Emotional Release

In the beginning of the year, make your Calm Bottle(s) together as a class. A simple way to include students in the process is to have each child put a pinch of glitter in the jar, naming a worry that they want to release.



Laugh It Out

SEL*F Component: Creative Expression

CASEL Competency: Self-Awareness

Purpose: Generate joy and fun in the body and community, to relax the nervous system, and increase dopamine levels.



Instructions

1. Gather students in a circle.
2. Students will close their eyes or look at a spot on the floor.
3. Invite them to remember a time when they had a really good laugh.
4. As they reflect, begin to laugh in the space, generating laughter from the students.
5. As students begin to laugh, the facilitator will laugh harder and exaggerated.
6. Continue laughing for as long as the laughter is alive.
7. Once the laughter has subsided, ask students to turn and talk about how the laughter made them feel from the initial memory to the end of the activity.

Reflection Questions

Why is laughter important?

How does laughing make you feel?



Teaching Tip

Some students may find it difficult to be exaggerated in their laughter and may only smile-allow them to do what is comfortable for them in their bodies.

Peaceful Warrior Practice

SEL*F Component: Mindful Movement

CASEL Competency: Self-Awareness, Self-Management

Purpose: Builds strength, increases energy, mind-body connection.

Instructions

1. We are going to do a Peaceful Warrior practice to energize and strengthen our bodies and minds! Find an open space (or your mat), and stand up tall in Mountain Pose. Plant both feet into the ground, open your heart, relax your shoulders down your back, and reach the top of your head towards the sky. Take a few deep breaths here.
2. From this powerful position, step back with one foot, and rotate your toes slightly outward. With your front foot, have your toes facing forward. Imagine a line connecting your front heel to your back inner arch.
3. Open your arms wide on either side of you, one extended in front of you and the other extended behind you. Bend into your front knee, working to have your knee on top of your ankle. Lengthen and energize your back leg.
4. Lengthen and activate your arms; bring energy into them. Look forward over your fingertips. As you take a few deep breaths here, say to yourself, "I am a warrior! I am strong!"
5. Flip your front palm up towards the sky, reach forward for your dreams, and then bring your hand up and back behind you, coming into your Peaceful Warrior. Rest your other hand on the back of your leg. Make sure that your back hand is either above or below your kneecap. Breathe peace into your heart through every breath! Inhale, saying to yourself, "I am peaceful"; exhale, "We are peaceful." Take a few more peaceful breaths here.
6. On the next breath in, come back up to your Warrior 2, and then safely bring your back foot forward to meet your front. Stand tall here, feeling your new warrior wisdom inside you.
7. Switch sides! After our final Warrior 2, bring your back foot to meet your front and meet me in Mountain pose.

Reflection Questions

What does being a Peaceful Warrior mean to you?

What were you thinking while you were holding each pose?

How did you feel when you were standing in each of the Warrior poses?



Teaching Tip: Emotional Release

Discuss safety expectations with students before mindful movement, and make sure that they each have enough space to move through the practice freely.



The Size of a Feeling

SEL*F Component: Focus

CASEL Competency: Self-Awareness, Self-Management

Purpose: Identify different feelings and gain awareness of the intensity of those emotions.

Materials: Balloons

Instructions

1. Invite students to close their eyes or look at a non moving object.
2. Tell them to connect to the feeling that they have in their body that might be uncomfortable and/or a not so good feeling (sadness, frustration, etc.).
3. Ask children to choose a balloon colour to match their feeling.
4. Students will blow up the balloon to a size that matches the intensity of their feeling.
5. Students will share out the feeling that their balloon represents.
6. In small groups of three (3), students will share how they could make the feeling smaller.
7. As a whole group, students will share how they can make the feeling smaller.



Teaching Tip

Notice if any students are negatively activated by the activity. Support them in getting present by feeling into the space (feel the chair, hear the sounds inside and outside of the room).

Adapted from Trauma-Informed Classroom Strategies by Linda O'Neill, Serena George, and Jillian Wagg

Reflection Questions

Why is it important to make feelings that don't make you feel good smaller?

How can you do this activity without a balloon?

How did you feel making the feeling smaller?



Chime Time

SEL*F Component: Settle In

CASEL Competency: Self-Awareness, Self-Management

Purpose: Focuses the mind, enhances mindful listening skills, develops awareness.

Materials: Singing bowl, chime, or other instrument

Instructions

1. Settle into a comfortable seat.
2. Practice focusing our minds, bodies, and attention on a sound.
3. Ring singing bowl (chime, gong, etc.).
4. Invite students to mindfully listen until they can no longer hear the sound or feel the vibration.
5. When the sound ends, students will silently hold up their hand (or a power symbol), and focus their attention on the sensations in their body.
6. (Optional) Try this practice again. Ring the singing bowl in a different way (e.g., harder, softer, longer, shorter, etc.); have students pay attention to how this changes the sound and vibration. When they no longer hear the sound, raise their hand and then reconnect to the sensations in their body.



Teaching Tip

Be mindful of students who may be sensitive to sound. Choose a sound that is less loud or more appropriate for them. Also provide students the opportunity to hold the chime or singing bowl to feel the vibrations, can be useful for students who are hearing impaired.

Reflection Questions

How do you feel after paying attention to the sound?

How did this experience impact your mind?



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www.breatheforchange.com



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