

What is Trauma?

“Trauma is not an event itself, but the body’s protective response to an event or series of events that is experienced as harmful or life-threatening. It can have lasting emotional and physical effects on an individual. Importantly, trauma is not experienced the same by everyone - a traumatic event for one individual may or may not prompt a trauma response in another, even if the experiences seem similar. Each individual’s response is unique and independent of those around them.”

- UCI Division of Teaching Excellence and Innovation

How Does Trauma Impact Learning?

“Trauma impairs our ability to make decisions, remember, and learn”

-Mays Imad (Professor of Genetics, Biotechnology, and Bioethics at Pima Community College)

As a result, students may have a hard time:

- Keeping track of changes in your class
- Making decisions about learning (e.g. overwhelm leads to feelings of “I can’t do it”)
- Prioritizing assignments
- Planning
- Engaging with classmates or the subject
- Managing their time
- Remembering details or content
- Resisting the urge to quit (the ability to stand in discomfort becomes difficult)
- Focusing on learning (concentration, memory/recall)

- Problem solving and understanding cause and effect relationships

What is Trauma-Informed Pedagogy?

Trauma-informed pedagogy is pedagogical practice that considers trauma, its prevalence, and how it affects an individual when planning a course and teaching. Some of the practices are very similar to Universal Design for Learning (UDL).

How Can I Support My Students?

Consider incorporating the following trauma-informed practices in your planning and teaching:

- **Create predictability by using consistent routines to reduce cognitive load.**
 - Use consistent learning tools and methods to make the course easier to navigate
 - Provide content and information in advance
 - Use content descriptions throughout the course, especially for potentially triggering media
 - Consider scheduling your daily or weekly announcements consistently
 - Create weekly checklists to help students stay organized
- **Be organized and flexible.**
 - Structure your course as clearly as possible so students understand the direction and how they will get there, week by week
 - Build flexibility into assessment and absence policies
 - From the start of your course, determine alternative plans if students are unable to turn in an assignment so they know in advance how to make up what they may miss
 - Offer flexibility in how you meet students (phone, in person, or online)
- **Foster empathy and warmth by extending compassion.**
 - Be present and active in the course
 - Communicate with students regularly
 - Check in on students throughout the term
 - Remind them you are there for them and describe how they can reach out to you
 - Arrive 10 minutes early in your classroom or virtual room and allow for small talk
 - For large classes, consider hosting small group virtual coffees
 - Extend compassion when planning elements of your course by considering the student experience:

- A student might be enrolled in a full course load, which requires them to process information, make choices, and stay focussed for five courses
- Not all students will have access to reliable internet or a quiet space to complete work

- **Provide additional reminders and re-emphasize concepts by scaffolding learning.**

- Remind students about when upcoming assignments are due because stress affects memory
- Scaffold learning by going over what was previously covered in class and how it connects to what they are learning next
- Share reminders using language such as “remember when we went over this and...” or “remember when you presented that and...”

- **Build connections by encouraging community building and sense of belonging.**

- Create safe spaces by building optional discussion boards to talk about daily lives (and participate in it as well)
- Suggest for students to check up on each other (facilitate this process - help the students help each other)
- Write an article, collectively as a class, on any topic they decide on
- Create a shared document where everyone can add one thing they are grateful for today
- Create a safe and inclusive framework for all class discussions

- **Foster empowerment by giving students voice and choice.**

- Give students agency and allow their voice to be heard by asking them to contribute to the design of the course in meaningful ways (e.g. create an assignment, suggest how they would measure what they’re learning, etc.)
- Foster autonomy and empowerment by providing choices where possible
- Provide multiple ways to engage with course content, where possible
- Consider creating authentic and alternative assessments instead of a high stakes final exam

How Can I Support Myself as the Instructor?

“You can’t pour from an empty cup”

-Norm Kelly

- **Reflect on your own trauma-coping strategies.**
 - How are you dealing with your own trauma and stress?
 - Who/what is your support system?
 - Find a healthy coping mechanism that works for you to mitigate the impact of stress and trauma
 - Document your journey with online teaching (How has it helped you? What are the challenges? What strategies are you using to overcome the challenges?)
 - **Don't go it alone.**
 - Work with colleagues or the Centre for Teaching and Learning to devise strategies for your classrooms. Having a network to provide support will help you sort out your ideas and help manage your own stress during this time
 - **Be mindful of your teaching experience.**
 - Become comfortable with the technology even if you're not 100% confident
 - Keep your course simple- it's not necessary to use every tool or feature
 - Consider your teaching load and keep grading manageable for your class size
 - Create assignments that you'll enjoy reviewing
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How to Get Started:

For more information on how to adapt your practices for trauma awareness, please see the [Trauma-informed Checklist For Higher Education Instructors](#) (Gunderson et al., 2023).

Additional Resource:

Explore [Trauma Responsive Online and LMS Course Design and Teaching](#) from Red Deer Polytechnic Centre for Teaching and Learning for additional information.

Resources and Supports:

[Counselling Services](#) at Red Deer Polytechnic provides students with information, resources, and support regarding some of the most common issues college students may experience such as academic performance, addiction & substance use, mood & mental health, relationships, self-image, sexuality & identity, stress, coping, and overall wellness.

Individuals can call, text, or live chat [Alberta 211](#) if they are in need of mental

health support, can't pay for pills, don't know who to talk to, can't afford food, or don't have a place to stay.

Individuals can call the toll-free 24/7 telephone service, **Alberta Mental Health Hotline** at 1-877-303-2642, which offers help for mental health concerns for Albertans. It is a confidential, anonymous service that includes crisis intervention, information about mental health programs and services, and referrals to other agencies if needed.

References:

References & Additional Resources

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