



# Responding to Trauma in the Classroom

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 -  June 2, 2020 -  Inclusive Excellence

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In the last few days, many of us have seen or read about the gruesome and violent videos of young Black men being forcibly restrained, hunted down, and killed in broad daylight and read the stories of a black woman being killed in her own home. Violence against Black and Brown bodies has been a horrific and longstanding trope of the American experience. While it has always impacted us, the recent demonstrations and riots eclipsing COVID19 news and media coverage challenge our courage at a time of immeasurable community and individual trauma. To help you navigate these complex and challenging times, we offer a brief summary of trauma-informed critical pedagogy as a way to consider how trauma may be impacting you and your students. We also invite you to check-in with students, and teach in a way that does not re-traumatize students but instead supports healing the mental and emotional effects of the trauma.

Below are some critical trauma-informed pedagogy considerations, suggested readings, and resources to help you on this journey. As always, contact the Director for Inclusive Teaching Practices for one-on-one consultations on Zoom, email, or over the phone.

### Understand & Acknowledge Trauma

- Trauma can be defined as any experience in which a person's internal resources are not adequate to cope with external stressors (Hoch, Stewart, Webb, & Wyandt-Hiebert, 2015).
- Trauma can happen to both individuals and communities.
- Earlier conceptualizations of trauma tended to focus on the actual traumatic event(s), but researchers and practitioners now recognize that the same event(s) can be experienced differently based on a range of cultural contexts, as well as social and psychological variables, unique to individuals and communities (Elliott & Urquiza, 2006).
- Neuroscientists have discovered differences in fundamental brain function among college students with co-occurring trauma and depression symptoms (Schaefer & Nooner, 2017).
- Processing prolonged stress and trauma can be physically and emotionally demanding and time-consuming (Brewin, 2003; Foa & Kozak, 1986).
- Normal goals and obligations may be suspended, at least temporarily, while the individual devotes time and energy to processing and working through the traumatic experience (Bonanno, Pat-Horenczyk, & Noll, 2011).
- Trauma has a continuing effect on people even after the end of a stressful situation or experience. Their brains are endlessly vigilant; and they may experience a constant baseline feeling of low-level fear, which leaves less space for curiosity, exploration, and learning (Hoch et al., 2015).

### Check-In with Students

**"How are you feeling?" an exercise from Jewell & Durand, 2020.**

"Imagine we're all traveling along the same lake. We start at the same place and the end goal is the same [equity, solidarity, justice, being seen, understanding difficult histories, solving complex problems, etc.] but we have different means and paces to get to where we need to be. Some feel too fast, others not fast enough" (Jewell & Durand, 2020, p. 111).

- How are you feeling?
- Where are you in this lake we're all traveling in?
- Do you feel like you're swimming, paddling in the canoe, or on a speedboat?
- Do you want to keep going at this pace?
- If you do, how can you support the folx\* who are moving at a different pace than you?
- Do you want to speed up, or slow down?
- Is your pace sustainable?
- What will happen if you chance pace?

\*Folx is a gender-neutral term created by activist communities.

### Supporting Students in Class

The following strategies have been adapted from Carello and Butler (2014); Downey (2013); Health Federation of Philadelphia (2010); and Wolpov, Johnson, Hertel, and Kincaid (2009) in Shannon Davidson's *Trauma-Informed Practices for Postsecondary Education: A Guide*.

- **Empower students.** Encourage a sense of agency by offering choices in how students participate in your class, for example, they can introduce themselves to the class on Zoom or in a pre-recorded message, biographical paragraph or artistic representation.
- **Check in with students.** Identify learning as the primary goal—and students' emotional safety as a necessary condition for it. Ask "how can I support you and your learning?"
- **Prepare for significant anniversaries.** On a particular date or during a particular time of year, students will remember a traumatic experience, such as going into foster care or losing a loved one to violence. If a student shares this information with you, it is critical to check in with that student around the time of the anniversary to identify needs for additional support.
- **Be sensitive to family structures.** Educators must recognize that students have different family settings, and they should consider changing their language accordingly (for example, saying "caregiver" instead of "parent"). Lesson plans should be constructed to maximize the inclusion of alternative family structures.
- **Avoid romanticizing trauma narratives in subject content.** Although some individuals experience post-traumatic growth after successfully adapting to the fallout of traumatic experiences, ensure your lesson content or subject matter does not depict trauma as romantic or desirable.
- **Identify mentors and other support systems.** Connect students to peers or other adults who can provide them with additional support.

### University of Denver Mental Health and Wellness

As part of the University's Culture of Care & Support we provide campus resources to create access for you to maintain your safety, health, and well-being. We understand that as a student you may experience a range of issues that can cause barriers to learning, such as strained relationships, increased anxiety, alcohol/drug concerns, depression, difficulty concentrating and/or lack of motivation. These stressful moments can impact academic performance or reduce your ability to engage. The University offers services to assist you with addressing these or ANY other concerns you may be experiencing. If you or someone you know are suffering from any challenges, you should reach out for support. You can seek confidential mental health services available on campus in the Health & Counseling Center (HCC) and My Student Support System (My SSP). Another helpful campus office is Student Outreach & Support (SOS), where staff work with you to connect to all the appropriate campus resources (there are many!), develop a plan of action, and guide you in navigating challenging situations. If you are concerned about yourself and/or one of your peers, you can send a SOS referral.

More information about HCC, MY SSP, and SOS can be found at:

- [Health & Counseling Services](#)
- [My SSP 24/7 confidential services for students](#)
- [Student Outreach & Support \(SOS\) and SOS Referrals](#)

### Books (and their Amazon links)

- [The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness](#) by Michelle Alexander
- [The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America](#) by Richard Rothstein
- [How to Be an Antiracist](#) by Ibram X. Kendi
- [Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America](#) by Ibram X. Kendi
- [An African American and Latinx History of the United States](#) by Paul Ortiz
- [Whistling Vivaldi](#) by Claude Steele
- [This Book is Anti-Racist](#) by Tiffany Jewell and Aurélie Durand
- [Feeling White](#) by Cheryl E. Matias
- [Teaching Race: How to Help Students Unmask and Challenge](#) by Stephen D. Brookfield
- [White Fragility](#) by Robin J. DiAngelo
- [Trans\\* in College](#) by Z. Nicolazzo
- [Beyond the Asterisk: Understanding Native Students in Higher Education](#) Edited by Heather Shotton, Shelly Lowe, Stephanie Waterman and John Garland.
- [We are Americans: Undocumented Students Pursuing the American Dream](#) by William Perez
- [American Like Me: Reflections on Life Between Cultures](#) Edited by America Ferrera

### Websites

- **LOOK DIFFERENT** is an online platform created by Harvard's Project Implicit and MTV to address bias, discrimination and microaggressions. It contains many exercises, ranging from a "Bias Cleanse", "Put Yourself in Someone Else's Shoes" and "Real Life Stories" to a series of responses to common micro aggression situations. I highly recommend this site.
- **Them**, "a next-generation community platform, chronicles and celebrates the stories, people and voices that are emerging and inspiring all of us, ranging in topics from pop culture and style to politics and news, all through the lens of today's LGBTQ community."
- **Project Implicit** is the Harvard implicit association online test. Consider having students take the tests and reflect on the results through intentional prompts designed to help them think further about the results.
- **The Southern Poverty Law Center** provides an online "Hate Map", "Extremist Files", "Active Case Dockets", and many "Featured Stories". Think about introducing the SPLC to students, have them engage with various resources on their website and create intentional assignments for them.
- **Teaching Tolerance** provides classroom resources, professional development and timely publications on issues impacting students in K-12. While not specific to Higher Ed., the website offers key overviews and lesson plans that can be modified for our setting.

### Podcasts

- **Teaching in Higher Ed** – explores the art and science of being more effective at facilitating learning. (Valentina highly recommends this one!)

### TED Talks

- [Kimberlé Crenshaw: The Urgency of Intersectionality](#)
- [How students of color confront impostor syndrome](#)
- [David R. Williams: How Racism Makes us Sick](#)
- [Priya Vulchi and Winona Guo: What it Takes to be Racially Literate](#)
- [Why we need gender-neutral bathrooms](#)
- [A powerful poem about what it feels like to be transgender](#)

### TED Talk Playlists

- **Love is Love Playlist:** These moving, personal talks share stories of love and commitment in the LGBTQ community.
- **Designing for Disability Playlist:** Good design – and smart technology – should fuel inclusivity. These talks show how tech and design can empower.
- **The Struggle of Mental Health Playlist:** These speakers who've struggled with mental illness boldly share their stories, in hopes that others don't feel so alone.
- **TALKS TO UNDERSTAND RACISM IN AMERICA**

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