

# Trauma- Informed Classrooms

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Dr. Bobbie Downs  
August 2021

[tinyurl.com/traumanjcts](http://tinyurl.com/traumanjcts)

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"It's okay to be on a bit of a rollercoaster right now. Sometimes you'll feel hopeful. Sometimes you'll feel sad. There might be a sense of grief at moments and a feeling of gratitude the next. It's okay to feel each of those feelings. No matter what anyone else is going through, your feelings are still valid. This isn't about competition. It's about compassion for others and ourselves. So we can show up for the ride every day, a little braver. A little kinder too. Ready to face those highs and lows together. *meow deedit!*"

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## The Iceberg Theory of Teaching:

What we see in the classroom is the bare tip of what's there—in terms of their capacity, but also in terms of the complexities of their lives.

Carol Ann Tomlinson,  
Educational Leadership columnist



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A Few Disclaimers:

- I am not a mental health professional- I am an educator
- We are not here to diagnose.
- We do not need to know all of the trauma our students experienced
- Trauma-informed responses are good for ALL students
- If at any time you need to step out, please do so.
- These strategies do not negate the need for mental health support, counseling, etc.

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How do we help our students the next day, the next week, the next year?

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### Being Trauma- Informed

- *What is a trauma-informed organization?*
- **Recognize** the prevalence
- **Realize** the impact of trauma on learning and behavior
- **Respond** in a trauma-informed way
- **Resist re-traumatization**- school wide or organization- wide culture and response to behavior (SAMSHA, 2012)

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## Recognize the prevalence

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### What is trauma?

- Trauma can be a single event, complex, or developmental
- Trauma can be:
  - Physical
  - Sexual
  - Emotional
  - Poverty
  - Neglect
  - Separation
  - Witnessing violence or substance abuse




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### Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

ABUSE	NEGLECT	HOUSEHOLD DYSFUNCTION	
Physical	Physical	Mental Illness	Incarcerated Relative
Emotional	Emotional	Mother treated violently	Substance Abuse
Sexual	Racial Injustice	Divorce	Pandemic

Check out this website: [www.cestoohigh.com](http://www.cestoohigh.com)

ACEs Study Overview <https://vimeo.com/139998006?ref=embed>

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### Prevalence of Trauma

- 26% of children in the US will witness or experience a traumatic event by the time they turn 4 years old (Statistics, n.d.)
  - Approximately 18,200 out of 70,000 Burlington County students
- National Survey of Children's Health: nearly 35 million children in US have experienced 1 or more adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)
  - Nearly 1/4 of those from ages 12-17 have experienced 2 or more ACEs, which are likely to impact their physical and mental health as adults (Stevens, 2017)

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Adverse Childhood Experience	National Percentage	# Students in Burlington Co.
Socioeconomic Hardship	25.7%	17,990
Divorce/ Parent Separation	20.1%	14,070
Lived with someone who had an alcohol or drug problem	10.7%	7,490
Victim or witness of neighborhood violence	8.6%	6,020
Lived with someone who was mentally ill or suicidal	8.6%	6,020
Domestic violence witness	7.3%	5,110
Parent served time in jail	6.9%	4,830
Treated or judged unfairly due to race/ethnicity	4.1%	2,870
Death of parent	3.1%	2,170

Note: The information for the number of students is based on 70,000 students enrolled in the county multiplied by the national average based on a study conducted by National Survey of Children's Health (2012).

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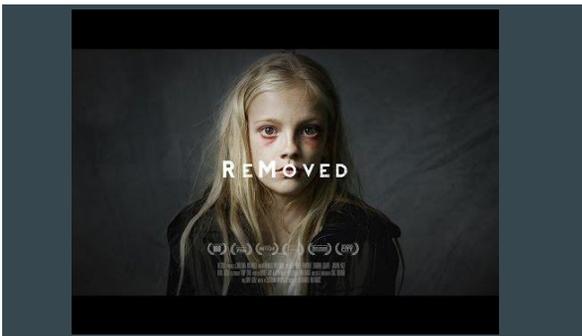
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## Remember:

No two people respond exactly the same  
Trauma can affect cultures, races, genders,  
ages, religions, **INDIVIDUALS** differently

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## Impact on the Brain

- Trauma has been found to...
- Change the structure and chemical activity of the brain
  - Decrease the size/ connectivity in some parts of the brain
  - Impair the emotional/ behavioral function of the child



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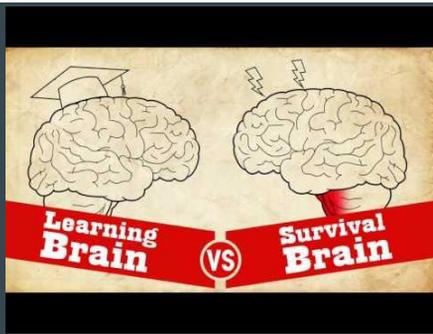
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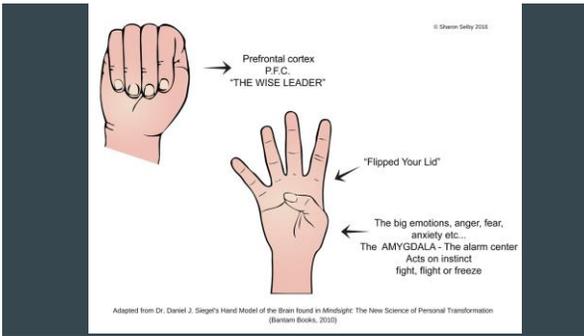
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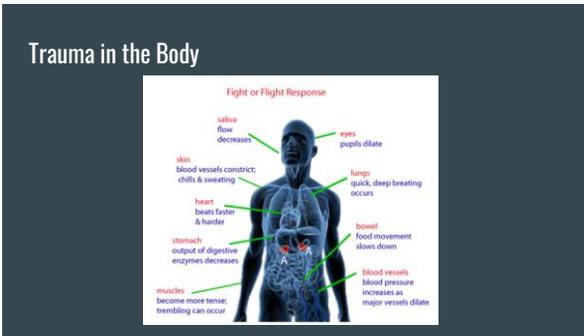
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### The Impact of Trauma on Learning

- Students are unable to self-regulate, focus, learn from past experiences, or control impulses
- Unable to trust their environment- "too scared to learn" (Terrasi & Crain de Galarce, 2017, p. 36)- fight, flight, and freeze

Mental Health Issues Linked to Trauma:

- PTSD
- Separation Anxiety
- Social Anxiety
- Depression
- Suicidal ideation
- Oppositional/ aggressive behavior

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**Imagine...**

Imagine you are in New York City at 3:00 in the afternoon with your friends. You are looking around, admiring the shop windows, looking at the architecture, laughing and talk.

What might this feel like?

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**Now Imagine...**

Now imagine you are in the city at 3 in the morning, alone. Are you still looking at the shop windows? Do you notice the architecture? What are you paying attention to?

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**For our students, it is always 3 am in a scary place.**

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### The Impact of Trauma on Learning

- Unable to access their critical thinking skills for problem-based learning
- Difficulty forming and keeping relationships, engage in unhealthy relationships, or isolate themselves
- Lack metacognition and self-efficacy

Young children exposed to 5 or more ACES in first 3 years are 76% more likely to have 1 or more delays in language, emotional or brain development  
 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011)

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### Trauma and Behavior

- Disruptive behaviors
- Poor frustration tolerance
- Depressed or Anxious mood
- “Don’t care” attitude
- Poor concentration
- Loss of interest in activities/ goals
- Suicidal thoughts/ behavior
- Anger
- School absences
- Fighting
- Substance abuse

Remember: everyone in the classroom has a story that leads to misbehavior or defiance. 9 times out of 10, the story behind the misbehavior won't make you angry. It will break your heart.

— Annette Breaux

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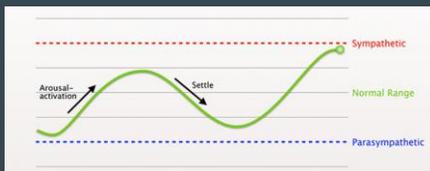
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### OUR STUDENTS ARE OFTEN DYSREGULATED (TRAUMA)

- Sympathetic Nervous System (Fight à Flight)
- Parasympathetic Nervous System (Rest à Digest)
- Normal “Rhythm” – “Brake” and “Accelerator”




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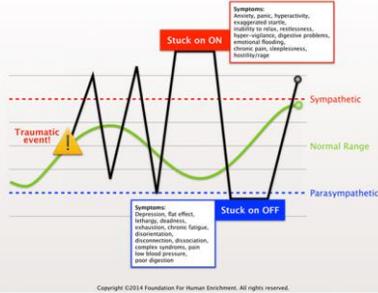
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### Symptoms of Un-Discharged Traumatic Stress




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### Effects of Trauma and Adversity

Trauma/Adversity impacts an individual's ability to:

- Trust
- Cope
- Form Healthy Relationships

Trauma/Adversity disrupts:

- Emotion Identification
- Ability to Self-Soothe
- Ability to Control Expression of Emotions
- One's Ability to Distinguish Between What's Safe and Unsafe

Trauma/Adversity impairs:

- Memory
- Concentration
- New Learning
- Focus

Trauma/Adversity shapes:

- A Person's Belief About Self and Others
- Ability to Hope
- One's Outlook on Life

Trauma/Adversity has been correlated to:

- Heart Disease
- Obesity
- Addiction
- Pulmonary Illness
- Diabetes
- Autoimmune Disorders
- Cancer

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**Respond**

In a trauma informed way

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### Things to Remember

- When students are experiencing trauma, it's like getting them to play chess in hurricane
- You have to help feel safe, be connected, be regulated, and learn-MINDFULNESS
- The good kids feel safer when you help the struggling students, not when you suspend them. Need to build relationships to create a sense of belonging.




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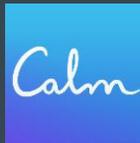
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### Strategy #1: Implement Mindfulness

- Sound Practice
- Body Scan
- Guided meditations
- Minute exercise
- Mindful walks
- Sensory Walks outside
- Mindful movement- cups of water
- Mindful eating
- Mindful coloring
- Guided Imagery
- Yoga



**Grounding Exercise**  
Name 3 things

- you see
- you smell
- you hear
- you feel

**Breathe in and out slowly 3**  
Social Work Career Development

- Check out the books: *Learning to Breathe Curriculum* (P.C. Broderick), *The Mindfulness Toolbox: 50 Practical Tips, Tools & Handouts for Anxiety, Depression, Stress & Pain* (D. Altman), *Guided Imagery for Healing Children and Teens: Wellness Through Visualization* (E. Curran)

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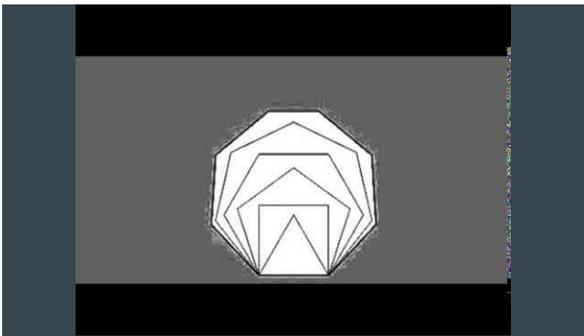
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## + Mindfulness Apps

- Sitting Still (for teens) 
- Headspace 
- Smiling Mind 
- Buddhify 
- 3 Minute Mindfulness 
- Calm 
- Stop Breathe and Think 

Website: [Change to Chill](#)

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## Apps for Students

 **Mind Yeti - Mindfulness for Kids and Their Adults**  
Calming app with cute characters helps center kids

 **Mindful Powers**  
Care for a cute creature to practice mindfulness and self-control

 **Super Stretch Yoga HD**  
Appealing videos inspire kids to move their bodies in new ways

 **Breathe, Think, Do with Sesame**  
Sesame Street winner teaches kids how to keep calm and carry on

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## Stop, Breathe and Think




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## Headspace for Educators

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## Moshi for Schools

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## Finger Labyrinth




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### Breathing Buddies

1. Students have a stuffed animal (buddy)
2. Lay on the floor with buddy on their belly
3. Breathe in and out and watch the buddy rise and fall
4. Count of three (1-2-3 In, 1-2-3 Out)

Other Ways to Practice Breathing:

- Smelling Flowers
- Bubbles
- Pinwheels
- Hoberman Sphere

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### Breathing Exercises

[Sesame Street in Communities](#)



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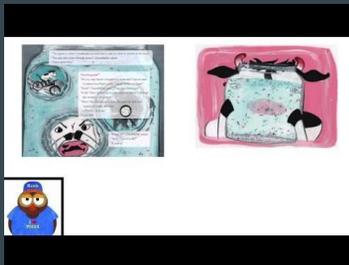
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### Mindfulness Books- Moody Cow Meditates



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### Alo Gives

WEEK 2

#### BE BRAVE

Build confidence, face fears and accept new challenges to grow and get stronger.



**DINO YOGA**  
Andrew Sealy | 6 min | Share



**NO-STRESS BREATH**  
Caley Alyssa | 3 min | Share



**POWERFUL YOGA**  
Josh Kramer | 5 min | Share



**HUG YOUR CHALLENGE**  
Hiro Lambakari | 5 min | Share



**FUTURE YOU YOGA**  
DeAndre Smetta | 6 min | Share



**BRAVE EGG**  
Download to print | Share

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### Implementing Yoga- Cosmic Kids Yoga



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### Implementing Movement- Go Noodle/ Go Flow



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### Calming Box

- Bubbles
- Glitter ball/ wand
- Hoberman sphere
- Mindfulness Coloring Pages
- Finger maze
- Fidget toys




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### Recommended Children's Books

A Handful of Quiet: Happiness in Four Pebbles- Thich Nhat Hanh  
 Peaceful Piggy Meditates- Kerry Lee Maclean  
 What Does It Mean to be Present?- Rana DiOrio  
 Silence- Lemniscates  
 Sitting Still Like a Frog- Eline Snel  
 Ahn's Anger- Gail Silver  
 Visiting Feelings- Lauren Rubenstein  
 Moody Cow Meditates- Kerry Lee Maclean  
 Mindful Monkey, Happy Panda- Lauren Aldefer  
 Sophia's Jungle Adventure – Giselle Shardlow  
 Little Flower Yoga for Kids- Jennifer Cohen Harper  
 Charlotte and the Quiet Place- Deborah Sosin  
 Puppy Mind- Andrew Jordan Nance  
 King Calm: Mindful Gorilla in the City- Susan D. Sweet  
 Take the Time: Mindfulness for Kids- Maud Roegiers  
 No Ordinary Apple: A Story about Eating Mindfully- Sara Marlowe  
 Zen Shorts- Jon J Muth

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### Recommended Books for Teens

[The Mindful Teen: Powerful Skills to Help You Handle Stress One Moment at a Time](#) by Daung X. Vo  
[The Stress Reduction Workbook for Teens: Mindfulness Skills to Help You Deal with Stress](#) by Gina Biegel  
[Mindfulness for Teen Anger: A Workbook to Overcome Anger and Aggression Using MBSR and DBT Skills](#) by Mark C. Purcell, Jason R. Murphy  
[Mindfulness for Teen Anxiety: A Workbook for Overcoming Anxiety at Home, at School, and Everywhere Else \(An Instant Help Book for Teens\)](#) by Christopher Willard  
[Learning to Breathe: A Mindfulness Curriculum for Adolescents](https://learning2breathe.org)  
<https://learning2breathe.org>  
[The Mindfulness Toolbox: 50 Practical Tips, Tools & Handouts for Anxiety, Depression, Stress & Pain](#) by Donald Altman

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## Strategy #2: Create a Calm, Predictable Environment

- Maintain usual routines. A return to "normalcy" will communicate the message that the child is safe and life will go on.
- Set clear, firm limits for inappropriate behavior and develop logical—rather than punitive—consequences.
- Warn children if you will be doing something out of the ordinary, such as turning off the lights or making a sudden loud noise.
- Post agendas and schedules
- Discuss what happens when there is a substitute teacher
- Plan for fire drills, assemblies, schedule changes, etc.
- Have pleasant colors, pictures of nature etc. in the classroom that students can focus on when dysregulated
- Create a calming space

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## Strategy #3: Give students choices

- Giving choices empowers students and helps them feel in charge
- Examples of choices:
  - Write with pen/ pencil
  - Colors of markers
  - Assignment menus/choice boards
  - Stand or sit
  - Where to work in the classroom
  - Which assignment to start with first- lay out all that need to be completed

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## Strategy #4: Help Students Talk about Emotions

- "Where in your body do you feel anger/fear/sadness/frustration in your body?" If they need some prompts, you can gently ask, "Is it in your stomach? Your chest? Your hands? Your head? All over? Is it in your toes? Can you find any place where it isn't?"
- "If it were a color, what color would you say it is?"
- "If it were a texture, what texture would you say it is?"
- "Does it have a temperature?"
- "What if it were an animal? What animal would it be?"
- "If this animal or shape or thing were to say something, what does it want to say? What does it need?"

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**The Guest House**

This being human is a guest house.  
Every morning a new arrival.

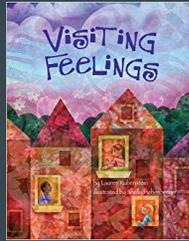
A joy, a depression, a meanness,  
some momentary awareness comes  
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!  
Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,  
who violently sweep your house  
empty of its furniture,  
still, treat each guest honorably.  
He may be clearing you out  
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,  
meet them at the door laughing and invite them in.

Be grateful for whatever comes,  
because each has been sent  
as a guide from beyond.

— Jellaludin Rumi,  
translation by Coleman Barks




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**Emotional Vocabulary Wheel**




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**Strategy #5: Provide Academic Interventions**

- Brainstorm problem solving skills as a group
- Use graphic organizers for students
- Provide students with words they can use in their speaking and writing
- Use multisensory approaches
- Incorporate physical activities and movement into the classroom
- Be cognizant of how the content/ material may trigger memories or upset the student

**FOR ONLINE:** USE GRAPHIC ORGANIZERS, VIDEOS WITH AUDIO/VISUAL COMPONENTS, WHITEBOARD FOR INTERACTION, MULTIPLE CHECKS FOR UNDERSTANDING

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### Strategy #6: Teach Resilience and Regulation

- Students who have experienced trauma need to build resilience and self-regulation skills
- Teach students the skill of **self-monitoring**: How do you observe, track and become more aware of your own thoughts, feelings? Teach students **words** to describe thoughts, emotions and physical sensations.
- I feel stressed when: \_\_\_\_\_
- I feel sad/upset when: \_\_\_\_\_
- When I feel stressed by \_\_\_\_\_, I usually act by \_\_\_\_\_
- When I feel sad/upset by \_\_\_\_\_, I usually act by \_\_\_\_\_
- This reaction is 1= Worst Reaction to 5 = Best Reaction
- <https://www.edutopia.org/article/4-step-process-building-student-resilience>

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### Strategy #7: Teach Resilience and Regulation

- Help students find **new strategies** that are similar to the way a student currently regulates in two important ways:
  - Does the student use physical / sensory or cognitive strategies?\*
  - Does the student attempt to regulate alone or involve others?
- Students will rely on your modeling to help them- it's ok to share your struggles too!

RESPONDING TO STUDENTS

1. **REGULATE** – First help students become calm
2. **RELATE** – Then listen
3. **REASON** – Then, if ready, reason and problem solve. Don't start here.

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### Strategy #7: Build Relationships!

- Relationships take time
- Relationships differ from person to person
  - Purple folder strategy
- Need to be genuine
- 2x 10 rule- 2 minutes for 10 days in a row

There is nothing more rewarding than building a safe, stable and authentic relationship with a young person in need of, but afraid to rely on, a trusting adult.

*How are you building and maintaining relationships in your online learning environment?*

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# Resist re-traumatization

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# Surprising Classroom Triggers

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### Focus on your own reactions

- **You are the most important element in a trauma-informed environment**
  - Students are hypervigilant to staff mood, actions and non-verbal communication. You have to manage your non-verbals if you want students to be regulated.
  - Nonverbal signals account for 93% of communication
  - Tone, rate of speech, choice of words, facial expression, voice volume, gestures, smile v. frown, personal distance
- **Check yourself** – Make sure you understand your own stress level, triggers and can regulate yourself before you react.
- **Focus on what's behind the behavior** – many students with ACEs act like they do for a reason. Have empathy – this is part of a normal stress response.
- **Remember to regulate** – relate and then reason.

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### How to resist re-traumatization

"Almost every student you meet may be fighting a battle you know nothing about. Stop, think, then make your response accordingly."

--Robert John Meehan

- Be mindful
- Be trauma-informed
- Be open to understanding students' needs
- Create opportunities for choice
- Work together with others
- Develop a systematic approach to trauma and mindfulness
- Take care of yourself!

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### Want to know more?




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"Every kid is one caring adult away from being a success story."

- Josh Shipp

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Twitter: @bdownseducator

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## Resources

- Sesame Street  
<https://sesamestreetincommunities.org/topics/traumatic-experiences/>
- The National Child Traumatic Stress Network  
<http://www.nctsn.org>
- White Paper for Trauma Informed Care  
<https://socialwork.buffalo.edu/content/dam/socialwork/social-research/TTIC/TIC-whitepaper.pdf>
- SAMHSA  
<https://youth.gov/feature-article/samhsas-concept-trauma-and-guidance-trauma-informed-approach>

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