Cultivating Resilience in Traumatized Youth

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Disclaimers

› Your youth are our youth.

› One size fits one.

› The goal of this workshop is to start a conversation about stress and trauma and resilience and how to identify and manage it in the classroom and community.

Tiers and TIES Strategies
Stressors v. Traumas

- **Stressors** → **Traumas** when the stressful experience is:
  - Recurring, unremitting, uncontrollable or exceeds the coping capacity of the individual
- **Coping capacity** = **Coping skills** + Supportive Environment in which to demonstrate those skills

Wisconsin & ACEs
(WI Children’s Trust Fund, 2010)

- 58% of adults reported having experienced at least 1 ACE in childhood
- 14% experienced at least 4 ACEs
- Results
  - Emotional abuse – 29%
  - Physical abuse – 17%
  - Sexual abuse – 11%
  - Violence between adults in household – 16%
  - AODA in household – 27%
  - Untreated mental illness in household – 16%
  - Separation/divorce of parents – 21%
  - Incarcerated household member – 6%

Prevalence of Trauma in Students

13 of every 30 students in a classroom have toxic stress from 3 or more ACEs
Percentage of Adults Reporting 4 or more ACES

Chronic Developmental Trauma

- Trauma affects children in different ways depending on the age and developmental level at which the traumas occurred.
- Traumatic experiences early in development interrupt the creation of supporting neurons for more mature skills.

Why Learn About the Brain?

- Understanding how the emotional brain works takes blame out of the conversation.
- Taking blame away increases emotional safety and opens hearts and minds to new possibilities.
- Talking “brain” language connects with curiosity and learning.
An Important Brain Rule

- Neurons are ‘use dependent’ – Neurons that are used, grow more connections to other neurons.
- Neurons that are not used, are ‘pruned’ or disappear.

The Amygdalae:
- We call them “Danger Alarms”
- One in each hemisphere, deep in the brain
- Receive direct input from senses – no filtering
- Triggered by perceptions of danger or threat.

Emotional Brain Team Players

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The Hippocampi:
- Our working memory centers
- Encode and store new memories

Amygdalae and the Body
- When the Danger Alarms go off, they immediately alert the Hypothalamus which signals the adrenals, heart, lungs, and blood vessels.
- This Sympathetic Nervous System – the body’s gas pedal – sends the body instantaneously into...
- **Fight, flight or freeze.**

Adrenals and Adrenaline
- The Adrenals release **Adrenaline** which...
- Makes the heart beat faster, increasing blood pressure and pumping blood to the arm and leg muscles so you can get away or fight.
- Tells the gut to shut down and send its blood to the arm and leg muscles.
More Brain Information

- The Hippocampi get busy encoding the memory of danger or distress so we can avoid it in the future.
- The Prefrontal Cortex, or Problem Solver, is slower to come ‘online’.
- The Problem Solver gets faster with practice.

Inside and Outside Triggers

- The Danger Alarms are triggered by perceptions of danger or distress
- An inside trigger might be remembering your mother crying.
- An outside trigger might be getting an eviction notice from the landlord.
- A personal trigger might be your husband leaving all the kitchen cabinets open while he’s cooking dinner.

Chronic Distress...

What if the distress happens again and again so the danger alarms never shut off? What effect does chronic stress and trauma have on the brain?
Hypothalamic–Pituitary–Adrenal Axis (HPA Axis)

- To keep the body/brain activated and responsive to chronic danger, the brain activates a second system, called the HPA Axis.

- This system causes the release of cortisol from the adrenals and triggers the conversion of glucose to useable fuel for our body.

Effects of Prolonged Exposure to Stress Chemicals in the Body

- Inflammation in the body which is associated with...

- Heart disease, RA, sleep problems, obesity, cancer, diabetes, and maybe even Alzheimer’s symptoms. (Wellen et al., 2005; Tony Wyss-Coray et al., 2012)

Effects on the Brain

- Early, repeated trauma leads to heightened production of stress chemicals in the brain, especially affecting the Amygdalae and making them hyper–reactive (Heim, 2001).

- Stress chemicals inhibit neurogenesis in the brain – the making of ‘baby neurons’

- Adolescents with PTSD showed smaller Prefrontal Cortex (PFC) volumes (Carrion et al., 2010)
The Hippocampi, the working memory centers of the brain, are covered in receptors for cortisol.

Too much cortisol can damage and shrink the Hippocampi (Hanson, J.L. et al., 2014)

Smaller Hippocampi mean weaker working memory skills and weaker inhibition – a learning disaster.

The Amygdalae get more reactive
- The Hippocampi and PFC shrink
- Increase in body-wide inflammation
- Changes in gene expression
- Faster cell aging

Early trauma creates “templates” or expectations about what adults will and can do for or to you

Child victims of physical abuse over-identified anger in photos of neutral faces. Non-abused children under-identified anger in those same photos (Garrett et al., 2012)
Parents/Teachers See...

- Short attention span and easy distractibility because of the constant neurologic hyperarousal. (Pollak et al., 2005)
- Lots of movement because moving eases anxiety → traumatized youth present with symptoms of ADHD.
- Is it ADHD or PTSD?

Trauma’s Sequela

- A strong bias towards seeing others as threatening or ‘out to get them’
- Easy reactivity to small problems
- Small problems are perceived as big ones
- It takes a long time to help the youth calm down and re-regulate
- The emotional outbursts are usually negative with overtones of blaming others

Resilience

Powerful Practices for Bouncing Back from Disappointment, Difficulty, and Even Disaster
Linda Graham, MFT

Five Strategies you can start using today!
Five Practices Grounded in Neurophysiology

- 1. Intentionally use rhythmic breathing energizing and relaxing cycles
- 2. Deep Sigh shift your physiology
- 3. Touch; release oxytocin, tend and befriend
- 4. Hand on the Heart remember a moment of safety, love, being cherished
- 5. Movement shifts physiology, strike a pose or just move

Greater Good in Action
Research-based exercises for fostering kindness, connection, and happiness. Here are several resilience practices, which can help you confront emotional pain more skillfully.

Try these Strategies

- Change the Narrative/Expressive Writing:
- Free writing continuously for 20 minutes
- Finding Silver Linings
- Face your Fears:
- Overcoming fear through slow gradual exposure
More from Greater Good

- Practice Self Compassion
- Address our own suffering with warmth and kindness
- Self-Compassion Break
- Be mindful
- Remember I am not alone
- Be kind to yourself
- How would I treat a friend
- Self Compassion Letter

Greater Good Magazine

- Meditate
- Body Scan, releases negativity and body tension
- Raisin Meditation change your relationship with food
- Mindful Breathing
- Cultivating Forgiveness
- Acknowledge what happened, how you feel and how it is effecting you right now, then let go.
- Letting Go of Anger through generating feelings of compassion for the offender
- Try the Nine Steps to Forgiveness
- Try Eight Essentials when Forgiving

Building Resilience

Step 1. Use the Trauma Lens to understand the functions and goals of a behavior

Step 2. Use Trauma Language to think about and build resilience in youth
The troubling behavior is the “tip of the iceberg” – the part of trauma that you can see.

Traumatic memories, worries and sad emotions live below the iceberg’s water line – the part you can’t see.

The Titanic sank because...

What thoughts, feelings and sensations do students and adults bring with them to school?

Eg, “I’m a loser”. “What mess am I going to have to deal with today?”

“I hate math”, “no one likes me”, feelings of dread, anxiety, butterflies, fatigue, “get me out of here”.

Student’s

Yours
The Prefrontal Cortex (PFC)

- Our “Hero Brain”
- Executive Functions originate here – planning, organizing, looking for solutions
- Weighs the pros and cons and
- Helps us to inhibit negative behaviors and urges.

The Hero Brain and Danger Alarms

- The Hero Brain can help calm the danger alarms (Amygdalae) and figure out how to make things better.
- This is called Resilience
- If the Hero Brain is weak, it cannot help keep the danger alarms calm.

Exercise Your Hero Brain!

- The Hero Brain needs practice and exercise in order to build a superhighway to the Danger Alarms
- This called Hero Brain fitness.
What Experiences Grow the Hero Brain?

- Exercise increases levels of B.D.N.F. (Brain Derived Neurotrophic Factor) in brain tissue (Miracle Gro for the brain) which leads to more baby neurons in Hippocampi (working memory).

- Aerobic exercise also has a down-regulating effects on Amygdalae – mechanism still not clear.

FITKids and Improvements in Attention

- 8 & 9 year olds were enrolled in an after school physical activity program – 70 minutes/day, 5 days/week for a school year.

- A matched sample of students were wait-listed.

Students in the after school physical activity program...

- Were faster, more accurate and more flexible in a difficult memory task that required them to ignore interfering stimuli.

- There were dose-related changes with students who attended more frequently, showing the greatest improvements.

- (Hillman, CH et al., 2014)
Meditation + Exercise ↑’s brain cell activity in the prefrontal cortex of individuals with depression that was almost identical to that of the people without depression.

A Regular Meditation Practice increases volume and efficiency of PFC, connections to other organelles in the brain and hippocampal functioning.

Meditation and Memory

- Inexperienced meditators participated in 8 wks. Of Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR).
- Results showed more grey matter (new neurons) in Hippocampi.
- More neurons in the parts of the brain active during empathy
- More activity in cerebellum – a player in emotional regulation
- (Carmody et al., 2011)

Meditation De-escalates Amygdalae

- Researchers have shown that describing oneself as “mindful” is correlated with smaller sized right Amygdalae (Taren et al., 2013).

- 8 weeks of Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR)
  --decreased volume in the right amygdala
  --reductions in perceived stress
  --per MRI scans performed before and after the 8 weeks of training (Davidson, Rj & McEwen, BS, 2012).
Connecting the Hero Brain to the Danger Alarms...

- Heringa et al (2016) took a sample of children who had been followed since birth, half of whom had experienced family adversity.

- The teens were shown positive, neutral and negative images while researchers watched their brains respond.

- The teens who showed stronger neural connections between their Hero Brains and their amygdalae, reported less depression and anxiety.

Start with Yourself

- Depersonalize the problem

- This is not about you. It’s about all the people who hurt this student before you.

- Take a moment to notice your own body sensations, feelings and thoughts.

- Exhale, take a short break, name your feelings, look down, count to 10...
Resist anger and your danger alarm’s ‘fight’ reaction.

Invite compassion for yourself and the student – anger never solves anything. It just makes it harder to see the solutions.

Think out loud so the youth can learn how to calm the brain.

Breath Based Meditation

The breath is an easy way to start strengthening the Hero Brain...

Even kids can do it... 😊😊😊


Stress Thermometer
Hero Brain Strategies to Build Resilience

- Remember... They may look 16 years old on the outside, but feel a lot younger and more vulnerable on the inside.
- Step 1. Calm the Danger Alarms
- Step 2. Work with the Hero Brain.

Enlarge the Feelings Vocabulary

- Ask students to give you “2 feeling words” for their rating.
- Collect new feelings words on a bulletin board
- Explore a feeling word-of-the-week
- Make a poster with facial expressions and feeling words so youth have some options to choose from
- Keep a pack of Feelings Flashcards handy...

Intentionally Speak “Safety” Language

- “Everyone deserves to feel comfortable and safe here...”
- “This room should feel safe to everyone. If it doesn’t, please let me know.”
- “You are safe here. I am here to help.”
- “This is a “Safe Zone”, I care about you.”
Create a Sense of Safety with Body Language
- Use a calm but clear voice when making a request
- **Smile big and long**
- Make gentle eye contact or look at the floor
- Back-up or sit down – stay out of their bubble
- Speak softly
- Turn down the lights

Assume the Best
- “This is not like you. Something in this class is setting things off...Hmm... what could it be?”
- “I like you and think you have a lot to offer here.”
- “What can I do to help reduce the stress in here?”

Use the Stress Thermometer
- Introduce and practice it during calm times
- Use the colored zones for younger children and the numbers for older youth
- Ask them for a rating before and after a discussion or interaction
- Remind them that being in the “yellow” zone simply means it’s time to call for the Hero Brain.
Ask About Triggers – Ahead of Time...

- Triggers occur earlier in the chain of causation.
- Identify early as well as more immediate triggers.
- Help eliminate or avoid as many triggers/stressors as possible.
- Help create a "green plan" listing ways to feel better after being triggered/stressed.

Make a ‘Green Plan’ Together Ahead of Time

- A ‘green plan’ is a roadmap for getting back in the 'green zone' on the Stress Thermometer.
- During times of low stress, partner with the youth to create a ‘green plan’.
- Eg. “What works the best to help your brain and body calm down?”

Talk Like a Team

- Ask for buy-in eg. "I’d like your help in solving this problem. Can you work with me?"
- Ask, “if you had your wish, how would you make this work?”
- “Thanks, that’s a start. Let’s start with your idea first.”
Sensory Breaks to Up-Regulate and Down-Regulate Emotions and Attention

- FIDGETS
- MUSIC
- BOOKS
- BOUNCING
- ROLLING
- SWINGING
- AROMATHERAPY
- RUNNING IN PLACE
- YOGA
- WRAPPING IN SOFT BLANKETS

Thank You!

- Practice breathing awareness often and for short bursts - short time, many times
- Send wishes for healing and happiness to the youth who distress you the most - they need it the most.

- When Prevention strategies aren’t enough…
De-Escalation Strategies

- Reassure that you like them and want to help
- Attunement – describe what you see. Eg. ‘I am noticing that your voice sounds loud and upset.’
- Generate compassion for both of you in your own mind and heart, eg. ‘wow, it must be hard to live in that brain right now.’
- Engage by doing less – step back, lower your voice, release eye contact, turn down the lights.
- Reassure them that you want to help and hear their side of the story.

Thinking Out Loud

- When you are stuck, breath first. Then think through the dilemma out-loud.
- Start by describing what’s happening in non-judgy language. Eg. “Paul is yelling and my danger alarms are going off.”
- Talk to yourself out-loud through a body-calming strategy like long, slow exhales or strong sitting. Eg. “I know if I can get a slow, deep exhale, my danger alarms will calm down.”

Add a Compassion Component

- Include language that is compassionate for both you and the youth
  - “I know we can get through this...”
  - “I want us to work this out. I know we can...”
  - “I want ease and happiness for both of us...”
Do the Opposite

- Respond with behaviors that are soothing and opposite to what the youth expects.

  Eg. If the youth was yelled at often, respond with a quiet voice, downcast eyes and physically back up.

  Say, “I’m sorry that my reminder made you upset. I want you to feel safe in this classroom. How can I help you refocus your concentration?”

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cKUvKE3bQlY

Putting It Together

- Conscious Discipline was developed by Dr. Becky Bailey and emphasizes:
  - Safety, connection and problem-solving
  - Minimizes focus on rewards and punishments

- DJ Batiste Shares His Experience:
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RXJGcqcJckA
Small Group Application

- Discuss a problem in common. Be hard on the problem and easy on the person.
- Identify a trigger early in the sequence and make a plan to change/eliminate it or...
- Identify a response early in the escalation and make a plan to change/interrupt it
- Role play or describe one small change you could make next time that might lead to a different outcome.

FINAL HOUSEKEEPING

- Questions, Comment and Feedback
- Evaluations

Resources for Educators

1. Trauma information and materials
   - NCTSN’s Educator Toolkit

2. Trauma Sensitive Schools – DPI initiative
   - http://dpi.wi.gov/sspwm/mental-health/trauma
   - http://dpi.wi.gov/sspwm/mental-health/trauma/e-resources
2. Apps (for both iPhone and Android)
   - Mindfulness Bell
   - Breathe 2 Relax
   - Gratitude Journal 365 Photos
   - Relax Lite
   - Centered State
   - Instant Heart Rate

3. Online Mindfulness Resources
   - http://www.dharma.org
   - http://learning.tergar.org
   - http://www.centeringprayer.com
   - http://www.centerhealthyminds.org
   - http://thehawnfoundation.org/mindup
   - http://learning2breathe.org

   - Regulation of heart rate and respiration:
     - http://www.yoga4classrooms.com
     - www.thinkingmoves.com
     - https://www.heartmath.org/research/
     - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YYe0I8kkFOA
Research Resources


- Pollak, S.D. & Kistler, D.J. (2002). Early experience is associated with the development of categorical representations for facial expressions of emotions. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, USA, 99, 9072–9076. PMCID: PMC124425
