

## TRAUMA FACTS FOR EDUCATORS

*Student:* “They say I have potential but that I am slipping out of reach. I wish I could focus and soak in the material, but I just can’t...I wish they understood how hard it is. “ - [traumasensitiveschools.org](http://traumasensitiveschools.org)

Examples of traumatic stress include community violence, neglect, natural disasters, sexual and/or physical abuse, and refugee trauma. Given its prevalence, it can be very helpful to be informed about the impact of traumatic stress on our student population. Please see below for some useful information from the National Child Traumatic Stress Network.

**FACT: One out of every 4 children attending school has been exposed to a traumatic event that can affect learning and/or behavior.**

**FACT: Trauma can impact school performance.**

- Lower GPA
- Higher rate of school absences
- Increased drop-out
- More suspensions and expulsions
- Decreased reading ability

**FACT: Trauma can impair learning.** Single exposure to traumatic events may cause jumpiness, intrusive thoughts, interrupted sleep and nightmares, anger and moodiness, and/or social withdrawal—any of which can interfere with concentration and memory. Chronic exposure to traumatic events, especially during a child’s early years, can:

- Adversely affect attention, memory, and cognition
- Reduce a child’s ability to focus, organize, and process information
- Interfere with effective problem solving and/or planning
- Result in overwhelming feelings of frustration and anxiety

**FACT: Traumatized children may experience physical and emotional distress.**

- Physical symptoms like headaches and stomachaches
- Poor control of emotions
- Inconsistent academic performance
- Unpredictable and/or impulsive behavior
- Over or under-reacting to bells, physical contact, doors slamming, sirens, lighting, sudden movements
- Intense reactions to reminders of their traumatic event:
  - Thinking others are violating their personal space, i.e., “What are you looking at?”
  - Blowing up when being corrected or told what to do by an authority figure
  - Fighting when criticized or teased by others
  - Resisting transition and/or change

**FACT: You can help a child who has been traumatized.**

# Trauma-Informed Tutoring

If a student has experienced trauma, it can have a significant impact on how they respond to stressful situations. In fact, certain scenarios may trigger a biological fight-or-flight response for a student, which can immediately affect their attitude, interactions, physical demeanor, and more.

Taking a trauma-informed approach is crucial to successfully supporting students during a tutoring session. It's also part of a longer ongoing process that involves learning, sharing, and building strong student relationships. **These tips for trauma-informed tutoring will help get you started.**

## Tip #1:

### Know what kind of behavior to look for.

There is no one-size-fits-all way for students to show a trauma response. However, erring on the side of caution when interacting with students helps to avoid situations in which you assume a student's behavior isn't coming from trauma—and then find out that it is. The following behaviors are some of the most common ways students may respond to trauma. However, this list is not exhaustive; trauma responses are unique and can present in a variety of forms.

#### Common Examples of Trauma Responses:

- Self-isolating from peers
- Intense emotional reaction seemingly disproportionate to the problem
- Lashing out physically
- Strong negative self-talk
- Suddenly shutting down a conversation

## Tip #2:

### Communicate and validate.

The two most important steps you can take are to encourage the student to communicate, then validate their experience. In order to communicate, the student may need the right space—both physical and mental—to process, which will help them share their experience and build resilience.

Once you've found a space for the student to comfortably communicate, use active listening skills to validate their experience. Focus on the emotions they are feeling right now, not the event that caused the trauma in the past. Additionally, don't assume that a student is overreacting or exaggerating; try to center the student's feelings. **A student's story may make you angry or upset, but don't assume the student feels the same way.**

#### Do:

- Utilize the couch or library area as a quiet space to connect.
- Listen quietly but actively.
- Let the student express themselves at their own pace.
- Give the student space by offering to step away for a few minutes.

#### Say:

- "How are you feeling right now?"
- "What do you think could be making you feel like this?"
- "What do you normally do when you're feeling like this?"
- "What do you mean by...?"
- "How can I help you right now?"

## Tip #3:

### Give the student options.

After you talk with the student, let them choose how they'd like to proceed. Even if you're in a classroom setting where choices are limited, come up with a few helpful, realistic options that allow the student to take back some control over the situation.

#### Ask if the student wants to...

- Take a break from the work they were doing.
- Get some water or a snack.
- Draw, read, or write to express their feelings.
- Speak with a trusted teacher or counselor.

## Tip #4:

### Follow up and follow through.

If you are concerned for a student's emotional, physical, or mental wellbeing or safety, communicate the situation to an 826 Boston staff member immediately. Otherwise, just continue to be a trusted resource for the student. Be sensitive to what they shared with you, but don't treat the student as "fragile" in future interactions. By remaining present, non-judgmental, and helping them to process difficult emotions, you are providing very meaningful support. In addition, it's important to make sure that you take any actions you promise the student that you will do, or communicate clearly why you are/were not able to. This helps the student build trust.

#### Inform a student if you need to share what they've disclosed to you:

"Your safety is important to me, and I appreciate that you trusted me with this information. It's my responsibility to make sure an 826 Boston team member knows what's going on."

## Tip #5:

### Care for yourself.

When you're supporting students who have experience trauma, keeping yourself healthy and well is sometimes easier said than done. It's critical that you take time to ensure your own well-being. Try to connect with friends, family, and communities that can offer support and allow you to process your own feelings. Make sure that you're feeding yourself well, getting good rest, and discharging extra energy through a walk or run.

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## Additional Resources:

For further tips on trauma-informed tutoring, check out:

- ["Five Ways to Support Students Affected by Trauma,"](#) UC Berkeley
- ["Responding to Trauma in Your Classroom,"](#) Teaching Tolerance
- ["How to Support Students Dealing with Trauma,"](#) Mindful

## SUPPORTING STUDENTS WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED TRAUMA OR GRIEF

“I stopped copying my cousin’s voice and let myself sing like I never had before, in my own voice.” - Elianny Ventura, *I Want You To Have This: A Collection of Objects and Their Stories from Around the World*

Across our programs, our staff and volunteers work with a number of students who have experienced depression, grief, and/or trauma. We do a lot of narrative writing with students, and sometimes our youth refer to traumatic experiences from their lives during a tutoring session - for example, the death of a loved one, or the loss of a family home. Students can also come into our tutoring spaces after seeing violent images on the Internet or on TV related to current events, which can have traumatizing and re-traumatizing effects. Truthfully, many of us find ourselves being saturated by images and feeling overwhelmed by these deeply upsetting events taking place. So how can we best be there for the kids?

In general, the HEART approach is a useful acronym for remembering how to respond to students who are sharing their grief with you:

- **H**ear what the student is saying
- **E**mpathize with student’s situation
- **A**ssess what the student’s needs are
- **R**efer to available resources
- **T**ell the appropriate 826 Boston staff member

By being present and non-judgmental about the student’s experience, you are providing meaningful support - it’s not your job to be a counselor, and you certainly don’t need to “have all the answers.” As students develop trust with our tutors, writing can become a healthy and critical outlet for them to process difficult emotions.

## FIVE-STEP INTERVENTION FOR TUTORING SESSION

Building off of the HEART approach, here is a process to follow as a tutor working with a student who is sharing a story that stems from a traumatic experience.

1. **Please be aware of the surroundings.** In our tutoring centers, we often work with children of all ages in the same room. It may be necessary to move out of earshot of younger children as your student relates a personal story, and/or responses to recent violent events.
2. **Stay calm and supportive.** Remember that your role is to listen and be empathetic - you do not need to be an expert or problem solver.
3. **Make an outline or plan for your work together.** Students who have experienced trauma particularly benefit from structure, and knowing what's coming next.
4. If you feel overwhelmed or unsure, **bring in an 826 Boston staff member at any point** to provide support or answer questions. We are here for you!
5. **Always inform an 826 Boston staff member at the end of a session** if you have been made aware of a student's experience of trauma. If the session takes places at a school, our staff will act according to protocol.

## SELF-CARE FOR THE CAREGIVER

“If your compassion does not include yourself, it is incomplete.” - Jack Kornfield

Keeping ourselves healthy and well can be easier said than done, particularly when supporting students who are really struggling. And so we would like to share with you a useful five-step formula for your own well being, which our own staff members have referred to during times of stress.

### Steps to Self-Care

Modified from:

<http://justjasmineblog.com/self-care-for-people-of-color-after-emotional-and-psychological-trauma>

- **Mindful Isolation:** Disconnect from triggering interactions or other situations that might trigger the fight-or-flight response.
- **Community:** Connect with people who you have identified as your empathetic and open support. Process your feelings with them.
- **Discharge Energy:** Find ways to exert physical energy. Go for a brisk walk or a run.
- **Well-Being:** Feed yourself well. Get good rest. Avoid toxins. Breathe deep.
- **Ask for Help:** If you find yourself unable to cope find a support group or therapist to assist you.