Strategies for Trauma-Informed Distance Learning

INTRODUCTION

Sometimes even the most effective teachers may struggle to reach a student. Discerning the reasons can be hard, especially if those reasons stem from the effects of adverse experiences that may result in trauma. The challenges of recognizing and responding to students' social, emotional, and mental health needs are compounded in a distance learning environment — and even more so during a global health crisis.
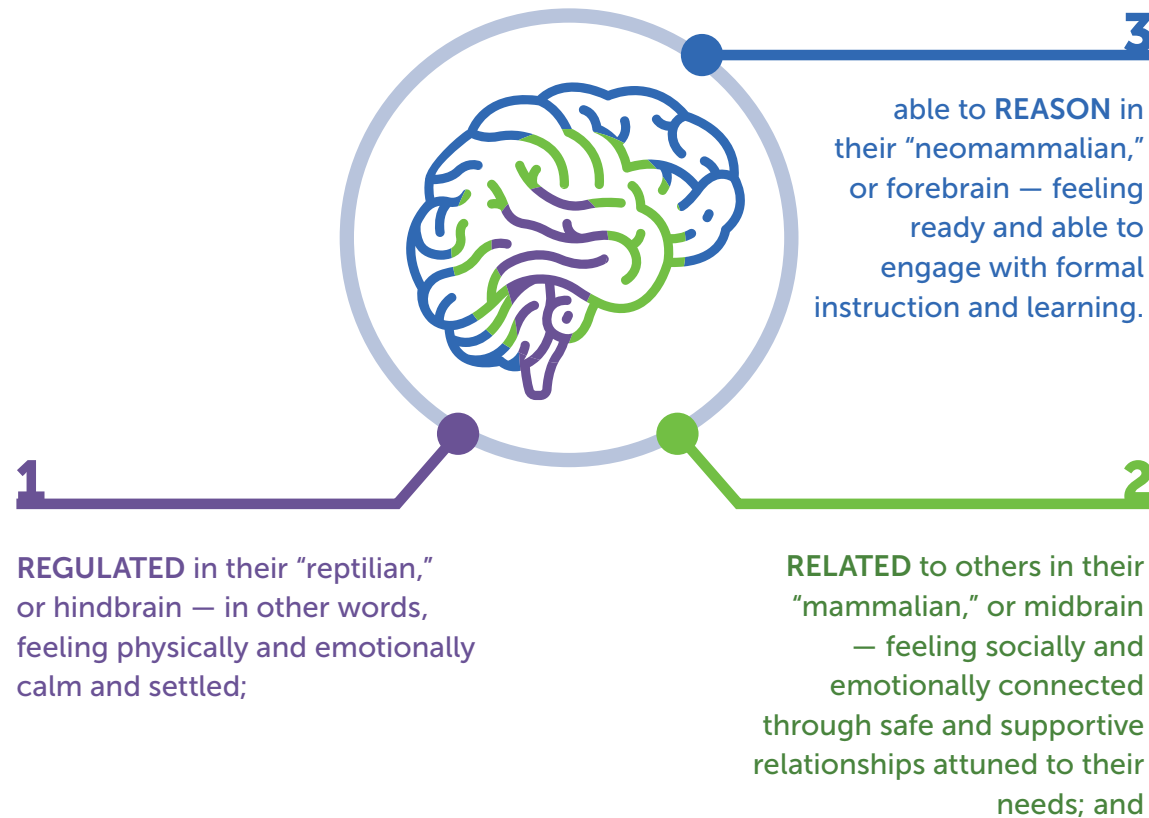
Childhood trauma may be caused by any of a number of adverse experiences,[1] such as abuse, neglect, and household and community distress.[2] Trauma can affect just about every domain in which students function, and can inhibit their ability to develop in a healthy manner.[3] Trauma can also negatively affect students' abilities to regulate emotionally, to develop healthy relationships, to pay attention, to engage, and to learn.[4]

Trauma-informed practices — such as creating safe and supportive learning environments and helping students develop consistent, positive relationships with peers and adults — are powerful ways to mitigate the effects of trauma and to promote resilience in children and youth. However, distance learning creates barriers to students' access to safe environments, healthy relationships, and needed supports. Because distance learning is taking place during a global health crisis, when students may already be experiencing increased levels of stress, adversity, and trauma, educators must remove or work around such barriers.

Even when teaching students remotely, teachers can engender safe and supportive environments that improve students' ability to engage and learn. One simple framework that can

1   Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2020). *Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)*. https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childabuseandneglect/acestudy/index.html

2   Shonkoff, J. P., & Garner, A. S. (2012). The lifelong effects of early childhood adversity and toxic stress. *Pediatrics, 129*(1). doi:10.1542/peds.2011-2663

3   Van der Kolk, B. (2014). *The body keeps the score*. Penguin Random House.

4   Bartlett, J. D., & Sacks, V. (2019). *Adverse childhood experiences are different than child trauma, and it's critical to understand why.* Child Trends. https://www.childtrends.org/adverse-childhood-experiences-different-than-child-trauma-critical-to-understand-why

guide trauma-informed education is neuroscientist Bruce Perry's "3 Rs" approach to intervention: Regulate, Relate, and Reason.[5] Perry suggests that educators should closely follow the process of how to reach the "learning brain" — beginning from the back of the brain and moving to the front. In this order, we want to ensure that students are:

3

able to **REASON** in their "neomammalian," or forebrain — feeling ready and able to engage with formal instruction and learning.

1

REGULATED in their "reptilian," or hindbrain — in other words, feeling physically and emotionally calm and settled;

2

RELATED to others in their "mammalian," or midbrain — feeling socially and emotionally connected through safe and supportive relationships attuned to their needs; and

A child who is unsettled is unlikely to relate to and connect with other people, and, until the child feels safe and supported, is unlikely to have the cognitive capacity to fully engage in the higher-level processes that are essential for learning and reasoning. This is true for all children, regardless of their stress or trauma history, but it is particularly critical to consider for students experiencing adversity, and especially in the context of distance learning.

To help educators use trauma-informed teaching practices in distance learning contexts, this brief offers some general strategies, with specific examples, for how to recognize and respond to students' social and emotional needs while teaching remotely. The strategies are organized by Perry's 3 Rs: Regulate, Relate, and Reason.

The strategies provided in this brief draw from research and best practices in various fields, including cognitive behavioral psychology; mindfulness and mindfulness-based stress reduction; trauma and trauma-informed practices; developmental psychology; neuroscience and neuropsychology; and distance learning. For further reading, a bibliography of related

5   Perry, B. (n.d.). The 3 Rs: *Reaching the learning brain.* https://beaconhouse.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/The-Three-Rs.pdf

resources is offered at the end of this brief. Note that this brief distinguishes between virtual (or online) distance learning settings, which use digital technology, and nonvirtual settings, which do not use digital technology.

REGULATE

Supporting students to become regulated is educators' first priority. Given the major shifts in format and schedule that distance learning requires, exacerbated by fear from a current crisis, students may be more anxious than usual. Anxiety may be more likely, and more pronounced, among students who have already been experiencing chronic and toxic stress, adverse experiences, and/or trauma. To help students feel more settled, educators can model and provide opportunities such as:

Begin interactions and lessons with grounding and centering exercises that help students focus on what is happening in their mind, body, and/or surroundings. This can help students engage and stay focused. These simple exercises can be recorded, spoken, written in an instructional packet, and/or read aloud by an adult.

- Say, "Before beginning this lesson, close your eyes or turn your gaze down to the floor, and take three deep breaths in through your nose and out through your mouth."

- Ask students to look around their environments, name one thing that makes them happy (or calm, or relaxed), and explain why.

- Ask students to scan their bodies for where they feel tense and where they feel relaxed and have them silently tell the tense parts to relax, so that the tense parts will feel the same way the calm parts do.

Create structure and consistency through lesson schedules, regularly scheduled communication, and clear, concise instructions.

- For virtual distance learning, provide an online calendar that shows each lesson or subject for the day, the start and stop times, and the due dates for any assignments. For nonvirtual distance learning, provide a paper version of the calendar, as well as instructions for where to send completed assignments.

- In virtual settings, try to communicate at the same time(s) every day and using the same format(s) (e.g., email, text, telephone). Let students and their parents or caregivers know how and when you will reach out to them and let them know how and when they can contact you.

Create even more opportunities than usual for breaks and physical activities.

- Encourage students (or their parents or caregivers) to insert breaks in at-home learning when appropriate for the students. In virtual settings, insert breaks

intentionally into daily lessons and activities, and, when learning is synchronous (i.e., when the teacher and students are online at the same time), check in with students to determine whether they need a break. To support asynchronous learning (i.e., when the teacher and students are online at different times) or offline learning at home, clearly insert intentional breaks into suggested student schedules.

- Encourage regular physical activity throughout each day to help all students focus. Students experiencing trauma may need additional muscle movement or sensory grounding, such as wrapping themselves in a heavy blanket, using fidgets, or sitting on movable chairs.

Promote self-awareness by providing opportunities for students to communicate their feelings.

- In a virtual setting, provide a developmentally appropriate "feelings" chart that students can use to share with you and/or classmates how they are feeling. The chart can use words and/or a feelings scale from 1 to 10. In a nonvirtual setting, have students share their feelings when safe and appropriate, either with a caregiver or with you during lessons or along with submitted assignments.

- Provide opportunities for students to communicate feelings nonverbally, such as by drawing or finding a picture and sharing it.

Promote self-regulation by providing activities and strategies for relaxing or calming activities.

- Before, during, or after a live or recorded lesson, pause to model a self-regulation break, and then invite students to repeat the behavior. Examples include conducting breathing exercises, smelling flowers, walking mindfully, closing your eyes, or listening to calming music. In a nonvirtual setting, write instructions for the student, which, if needed, an adult can read aloud.

Provide choices for both student input and student output, to accommodate individual learning styles, preferences, and needs.

- Offer instruction in both auditory and visual formats. For example, in a virtual setting, record your voice with accompanying slides; in a nonvirtual setting, have adults in the household read instructions aloud, or offer assistive devices, when appropriate.

- Allow students to use various assignment response formats, such as handwritten (then scanned and uploaded, if virtual), typed, or verbalized.

Offer suggestions for ways to meet students' sensory needs.

- Suggest options for students with sensory and regulation needs, such as fidgets, ball chairs or other moveable seating, weighted blankets, and/or lessons with movement built in.

- Suggest ways for students to adjust their environments to help them feel more settled, such as improving lighting, reducing sounds and other distracting noises, and decreasing visual clutter.

RELATE

For many students, their experiences in school — both with the school's environment and with adults and other students — create a sense of safety and support. Distance learning can represent a loss for those students, especially for those who are navigating adversity at home or in their broader communities. Now more than ever, it is important for teachers to promote positive, healthy relationships with their students by noticing and being sensitive to what they need, being attuned to those needs, and responding to students in warm, inclusive, and supportive ways, such as:

Consider how you perceive and respond to challenging student behaviors.

- Reframe students' challenging behaviors. Behavior is communication — it is telling a story or revealing an underlying need. Many of students' involuntary fight, flight, and freeze reactions may look like defiance, noncompliance, or task avoidance, but these behaviors are simply symptoms of an underlying brain function. Understanding this may help you become aware of students' needs and respond appropriately.

- Seek to respond, rather than to react. Reactions are reflexive and unconscious, resulting from previous experiences and conditioned over time. By contrast, responses are thoughtful and intentional. Understanding which behaviors by others tend to activate you and learning how to regulate yourself are both important strategies for helping you address students' needs — and for teaching them how to regulate themselves.

Model positive interactions and explicitly address the importance of positive social connections.

- In a virtual setting, greet students by name and with a smile or an emoji. In a nonvirtual setting, greet students by name in writing or verbally, and use drawings, stamps, or stickers to represent positive emotions on assignments.

- Begin lessons with a relational warm-up activity. For example, ask students about something fun they did the previous day or something they enjoyed about the last lesson.

- Plan activities that allow for interaction, when possible. In a virtual setting, use tools such as online community platforms or videoconferencing, so that students can see and hear you and one another. In a nonvirtual setting, plan activities that allow for interaction in other ways, such as through group texts or phone conferences, so that students can interact with you and with one another.

Emphasize caring connections between students and the community for the purposes of student and family wellbeing — even when discussing academic content or performance.

- Create remote or virtual outreach opportunities, by sending messages, creating online hubs, or offering "community hours" for students and family members to check in and chat about academic or nonacademic topics. In a nonvirtual setting, write and mail letters, make phone calls, or schedule "walk-bys" or "drive-throughs" — when allowable under state and/or local guidelines — to wave or speak to students, from a safe distance away, near their homes.

- Encourage students and their families to talk on the phone or by video with one another when possible, or schedule virtual "play dates" or other home-based activities that they can do together virtually when all participants are available.

- Create an appreciation or gratitude activity for students to do together with one another or with their families, such as mailed cards, emailed notes, or spoken words.

- Regardless of a student's performance or ability to complete tasks, communicate appreciation of student and caregiver efforts.

- Encourage students and their parents or caregivers to connect with counselors or other trusted adults. Offer students other connections or resources to use if they need help or are worried about their safety or well-being.

- Encourage parents and caregivers to limit the amount of time that they spend watching or listening to the news or discussing information about current events, while they are in the presence of students. This is to reduce students' exposure to potential fear-based information, which can impede their ability to regulate, or can exacerbate existing stress or trauma.

REASON

Once students are regulated and related — feeling safe and supported — educators and others can support their learning of academic content that may require recalling, reflecting, and/or communicating their knowledge.

Be realistic and gentle about creating a "new normal" with students and their families.

- Many students who face adverse experiences and who live with trauma have not been prepared to use distance learning tools, either virtual or nonvirtual, or to shift to learning at home. Therefore, effective and meaningful lessons and activities may not happen immediately or all at once. Provide students, their families, and yourself the time and space to figure out a "new normal," giving everyone permission for trial and lots of error. Be patient, prioritize, and let some things go.

Reduce workloads for yourself and your students.

- With stress and change, students' physical and mental capacities to handle an academic workload are diminished. If you are using the lessons that you would normally use in your classroom for distance learning, consider slimming them down, such as by reducing the amount of reading required or decreasing the number and/or the length of responses that you ask for. For example, if you normally assign five word problems for homework, consider assigning only two or three.

Support executive functioning and self-management skills by breaking work into smaller pieces.

- Ensure that instruction and materials are "chunked," giving students the opportunity to focus on one new learning task at a time. Encourage caregivers to follow this "chunking" method with students as well.

- Ensure that instructions are clear and concise, with one or two steps presented at a time.

- When possible, use both written and verbal instructions. Encourage parents and caregivers to read any instructions for the student aloud.

- Provide lots of opportunities for breaks, fun activities, and connections with peers and teachers (see the previous "Regulate" and "Relate" sections for examples).

- Allow plenty of time for students to process information and to respond to it.

- Ask parents and caregivers to do their best to establish a routine for learning, to involve students in developing schedules, and to set reasonable expectations of students while at home. Provide organization and structure by using hourly, daily, and weekly lesson schedules that students can follow as an example, but remind

students, parents, and caregivers that the provided schedules can be customized to meet their needs.

- Suggest ways for family members to connect their students' learning with household activities, such as cooking, cleaning, and participating in household repairs. These activities can provide valuable experiential learning while also fostering bonds between students and their families.

- Enable students to explore their own interests through activities such as virtual field trips, optional research, and games.

Before using lessons, texts, activities, and videos, ensure that they are not activating for students and their families.

- Check all materials to ensure that all content is developmentally appropriate and is free of aggression and violence, even if it is a cartoon or a piece of fiction.

- Ensure that all language used in materials is nonviolent. For example, avoid words such as *trigger, shoot*, and *aim.*

- If possible, let students and their families know the topic of a video or activity in advance, so that they can decide whether or not to participate. Allow them to opt out or consider an alternative if the topic is activating for them.

CONCLUSION

Distance learning during a global health crisis is enormously complex. Educators must not only attend to their own mental health and emotional needs; they must also attend to those of their students, even while being physically separated from their students and while learning to use new tools and technologies. Using the strategies in this brief to address students' social and emotional needs for regulation and relationships will help educators ensure that students are ready to reason and can continue to thrive, even from a distance.

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