

## **TRAUMA INFORMED TEACHING TIPS**

Humans are “hardwired” to be in relationships with family, friends, partners, and community; unfortunately, these relationships are not always healthy and can result in Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). Such trauma can change the self-regulation response in the brain and may create mild to severe reactions when situations bring back painful memories. Included below are tips on reducing, recognizing, addressing, and managing potentially upsetting moments. This guidance is useful for any youth program containing sensitive issues such as sexual assault, consent, dating violence, looking at the past and setting goals for the future, and more.

### **FOR PROGRAM MANAGERS**

- Provide facilitators with trauma-informed care skills, including recognizing signs that a student might be struggling (body language, putting head down, crying, tensing up, not making eye contact, disruptive behavior) during a lesson.
- Encourage facilitators to study the activities and student materials of the program they are using while they consider the needs and issues of their youth. In collaboration with staff and program leadership, consider if any modifications are needed to be more trauma sensitive, while still sticking to fidelity of the curriculum.
- Ensure facilitators have a clear understanding of the goals of the program, as well as individual lessons, so they are able to frame and debrief each lesson with youth.
- Responses among youth can vary greatly. Practice anticipating a wide range of responses to content is valuable. Practice and share via on-going, peer-facilitator mentoring how to supportively respond, ask questions, and discuss.
- Within the organization, engage in an on-going practice of sharing methods for handling a difficult situation without drawing attention to the student.
- Suggest that facilitators identify local referrals, varying sources of support, and mental health resources within the school, the organization, or outside of the classroom so as to share with a student in need.
- If funds allow, consider adding a counselor position to work one-on-one with youth who disclose trauma or are having difficulties. This is especially important if the site where you are working does not have this resource.

## WHEN WORKING WITH SCHOOLS OR OUTSIDE ORGANIZATIONS

- When bringing a program into a school or organization, it is ideal to have the relevant teachers, staff, administrators, counselors, or case managers aware and knowledgeable about the program. They are the facilitators' partners. Short of having them attend the training, an overview with goals and details of the program can be offered to pertinent staff. In addition, invite staff to browse the materials and offer their input.
- Understand the organization or school's resources and policies in handling difficult situations (e.g., calming room, access to counselor/child psychologist, opting out, etc.).

## TIPS FOR EDUCATORS

Predictability, routine, and knowing what to expect are important in working with young people who have experienced ACEs. Teenagers, in general, do not like the unknown.

- Let students know what each lesson will entail. Before each lesson, give a general introduction on its content, what they will be doing, and why you're covering this information or doing these activities (i.e., what's the goal and/or purpose). If a lesson contains more sensitive information, let the students know before presenting the specific content. Reassure students their safety is key and if they find themselves feeling deregulated, they are welcome to practice their personal coping mechanisms.
- Build a healthy, appropriate relationship with your students. Always remind students that you are there for them. Welcome them to talk with you after the lesson. Students need to feel their teachers are open and caring.
- In addition to the connection a student may make with you as their teacher, we know connections with caring adults are a top protective factor for all youth and especially critical for those with trauma in their pasts. Try to discover who has a "go-to" person and who does not. Discuss with colleagues in the program and staff in partner institutions how to connect vulnerable youth with caring staff or other adults.
- Discuss the term "big feelings" and that some of the content may bring about "big feelings" for some youth and options for what they may do if they find themselves feeling those "big feelings."
- For lessons containing more sensitive information, end the lesson a few minutes early to allow time to debrief. In the debrief, talk about why the lesson is included and the rationale for it being in the curriculum. (See "talk-back" tool below.)
- Play music while students enter the classroom and do activities. Ask students what

type of music they like to hear and include their suggestions.

- Remember to frame before and debrief after videos or content that may be sensitive to students.
- Remember the importance of processing, checking in with students as a whole and individually as necessary, as well as reminding youth that if they need to step out of the room momentarily, they can (this may be a good time to have a co-facilitator, if possible, outside to speak with those youth); or if they need to disengage (e.g., focus on something else temporarily, doodle, put their head down) for a moment, they're more than welcome to practice their self-regulation skills until they're ready to come back to the discussion.
- If you notice that one of your students is having a reaction but doesn't leave the room, you may consider checking in with them individually during an activity as to not draw too much attention to them. For example, if your youth are working on an individualized activity, you may walk around the room and check in with a few students before checking in with the student who seemed upset earlier. This way it will seem like you're just checking in with students at random and are therefore less likely to draw any unwanted attention to the student.

### **Additional suggestions and resources**

- Lead students through a one-minute calming activity before/after lessons, especially if there's a particular content piece that could be difficult. This is generally a good practice for centering, focusing, and calming. A new resource to consider is from [Mind Matters Minutes](#): eight short, free practice videos (mostly 4-5 minutes each) from the [Mind Matters](#) curriculum that can be easily shared with youth. Each of these research-based skills can reduce reactivity and build resilience (e.g., *Focused Breathing*, *Body Scan*, *Emotion & Thought Breath*, *Loving Kindness*, *Wheel of Awareness*, *Peripheral Vision*).
- Provide students with finger gadgets, coloring/doodling paper, markers, crayons, etc. to use while participating in lessons.
- Regularly offer opportunities for short, anonymous (no name), written "talk-backs" at the end of sessions or after a particular piece of sensitive content. Invite youth to jot down a reaction, a question, a connection, or a comment to a particular lesson or piece of content. You can mix up the prompts. (e.g., *A question this left me with...* *A feeling I have right now...* *A connection I made to this...* *Something I want to say...*, etc.). These can be read quickly by the instructor after class. Doing this regularly or periodically can help a teacher keep a finger on the pulse of youth's feelings and reactions.
- Be aware of the institution's provisions and protocols for allowing a student to go to a calm-down area (if available in the classroom or another location) or, with permission of the regular teacher, take a walk, get a drink, or receive an

alternative activity to complete outside of the room.

- If a difficult occasion arises for a student, work with the classroom teacher or organization's staff to address the student's reactions.
  - Follow up with the counselor, case manager, or teacher to help guide you in best supporting the student.
  - Develop a subtle signal between the facilitator and students. This allows student to let the facilitator know they are experiencing a negative reaction.
  - If in a setting where you have two staff, develop an understanding that when one staff person sees the student's or facilitator's signal, the second can intercede by asking the student for help outside of the classroom or that they are needed in the office. Have the teacher follow up with the student before re-entering the class, with the support staff in sight for support.
- Within your organization, discuss the importance and brainstorm more ways of helping a youth identify a "trusted adult" or connecting youth with a caring adult in the organization where the program takes place or in the community.