

Teaching With Trauma

For teachers coping with adverse childhood experiences or other traumas, common classroom situations can trigger strong reactions.

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Teacher Wellness

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My student has plagiarized her paper.

Though I hate to be suspicious, her brilliant analysis is just a little too brilliant. She has lifted her writing from a website I explicitly asked my students not to use.

My heart begins to pound. Why would she do this? How dare she think she could get away with it? I get irritated—then angrier and angrier.

Partway through this episode, it occurs to me: “Your emotions are out of proportion to this. She’s a teenager who consulted the internet for ideas—you’re surprised? Yes, you must address it, but it’s not about you.”

I get it, intellectually, but I’m still reeling.

ACEs and Childhood Trauma

This is just one everyday teaching situation that might inspire overwhelming emotion in a teacher who has experienced trauma. As the teacher tries to calm herself down so she can better handle the situation, she must also deal with the embarrassment that comes with being so affected by students’

behavior.

Childhood trauma and trauma-informed teaching are hot topics right now, and many school districts are taking steps to create environments that are both preventative and protective for young people dealing with adverse childhood experiences, or ACEs, which include experiencing or witnessing domestic abuse or substance abuse, having an incarcerated family member, and parental separation or divorce.

The [original ACEs study](#) showed that people who have experienced multiple childhood traumas are more likely to smoke, be alcoholic or overweight, attempt suicide, and suffer from both mental and physical health problems later in life.

Since childhood trauma is so common (over half of the 17,000 adults surveyed in that study reported at least one ACE, while one-fourth reported two or more), it's inevitable that some of the adults working with children with ACEs are themselves dealing with the lasting effects of trauma.

Teaching With Trauma

Teaching can be an especially fraught profession for people who struggle with emotional regulation. “Even traumatized patients who are making real contributions in teaching... expend a lot more energy on the everyday tasks of living than do ordinary mortals,” writes Bessel van der Kolk in [The Body Keeps the Score](#).

Van der Kolk explains that many people who have experienced trauma develop a “faulty alarm system” that’s easily triggered by minor events. For instance, someone who’s been through trauma may read an expression of mild irritation as anger or interpret constructive criticism as a threat. Moreover, once their fear response is activated, it can take longer and be more difficult to calm down.

Though “don’t take things personally” is common—and valuable—classroom management advice, even teachers who aren’t facing their own demons sometimes struggle with it.

But for teachers who are wired for hypervigilance, not taking things personally can feel almost impossible. They marvel at their calm, collected colleagues whose voices never seem to quiver with irritation or anxiety, who seem easily able to stay in control.

Strengths of Being a Teacher With Trauma

If you’re a teacher who’s experienced adversity, you’re uniquely positioned to recognize and help struggling or traumatized students.

One of the best things you can do is make a commitment to your own healing. Failing—and feeling like a failure—are common. Don’t give up. But don’t ignore your shortcomings, either. Your colleagues may brush them off, but your students won’t be fooled. So if you overreact or speak harshly, apologize. If you’re having an off day, it’s OK to say that.

When a student is throwing attitude and has just violated your cell phone rule for the third time in a week, it’s natural to want to pounce. But if you find your emotions running high, try waiting to respond. You’ll be surprised at how effective you are when you give yourself time to calm down, process, and let your rational brain come back online before taking action.

Fortunately, many of the trauma-informed practices being introduced in schools around the country can be just as helpful for teachers as they are for students. Look for ways to practice mindfulness, self-awareness, and emotional regulation skills in your classroom on a daily basis.

Asking for Help

After I discovered my student’s plagiarism, my anger gave way to anxiety

about having to confront her. I decided to consult a teacher who I knew had a good rapport with her. She gave me a little pep talk, sharing what she would say in the same situation.

“Don’t take it personally,” she said, sensing my anxiety.

Hearing from a teacher who was clearly more adept at detachment helped me to visualize what a successful encounter with this student might look like. My colleague suggested a few great lines I hadn’t thought of—and she correctly picked up on how bad I felt about the whole situation.

“She’s the one who should feel bad, not you,” she told me. That hadn’t even occurred to me.

In the end, my conversation with the student didn’t go perfectly. My nervousness was apparent, and I forgot some of my colleague’s great lines. What shone through, though, was that I cared—that I wasn’t angry, that I thought she could do better, and that I wanted to help her make things right.

After our meeting, it took a little while for things to calm down. I gave her some space, bracing myself each day against the negative energy I perceived from her. I also took care to treat her with kindness and respect. Within a few weeks, our relationship wasn’t just back to normal—it had actually improved.

For a teacher who has experienced trauma, it often takes more work and emotional energy to deal with the small, day-to-day issues that teachers face. But it’s still possible to be a highly effective teacher.

And it’s worth the extra effort. As adults working to learn the tools of emotional regulation, effective communication, and other skills we may not have learned as children, we’re modeling what it looks like to heal and thrive.