

Yes, You Can Do Trauma-Informed Teaching Remotely (and You Really, Really Should)



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How to support students experiencing adversity during the coronavirus crisis




By **Brittany R. Collins**

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This is a challenging time for everyone, and teachers are concerned. Concerned for their health and their families. Concerned about equity, access, and best practices as they turn to new online learning-management systems. Concerned about curricular continuity. And concerned for students' physical and emotional well-being.

In recent years, trauma-informed teaching strategies have offered salve in times of stress, giving educators guidelines for supporting students experiencing adversity. But how can these pedagogies translate to an online context? How can we support students' social-emotional health and help them process these unprecedented events when we are not sitting in a circle or walking out to recess?

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In addition to completing my undergraduate education program via distance learning, I have worked for three years with middle and high school students through Write the World, an online writing platform for young people across the globe. Zoom is my office, asynchronous programming and communication the constraints within which to develop innovative curricula.

Throughout my work supporting the writing, thinking, and development of teenagers in this virtual space, I have found it helpful to keep in mind psychologist Howard Bath's [three tenets of trauma-informed care](#): safety, connection, and emotional regulation. Although the COVID-19 crisis precludes teachers' ensuring students' physical safety, there is much we can do to create online learning environments that feel safe—that foster connection and emotional regulation as we all face uncertainty and potential trauma.

Research suggests that when adversity feels like a shared experience, we cope better—not only emotionally, but neurologically. That’s (partly) why we should be integrating storytelling into online learning. From teenagers who take to **Twitter while mourning the death of a close friend to gang violence**, to middle schoolers who whisper to the paper cutout of an ear taped to their classroom door, trauma studies reveal that the very act of formulating and articulating narratives about our lived realities **offers reprieve and promotes resilience**.

"Even as you are helping your students through this difficult time, be sure to honor your own limits as well."

But there are much more effective ways to bear witness to students’ stories than resorting to Twitter or a “talk to the ear” system. In your online community, be forthright about your care and concern for students and the contexts in which they find themselves. Establish yourself as a safe person to whom they can turn for support. Do this by directly acknowledging the circumstances we are in and being honest about how this situation impacts you.

Though it is always important to maintain appropriate boundaries with students, **calibrated reciprocity is a key component of storytelling**. Naming emotions (“I’m feeling stressed and confused”) can teach students, by modeling, that it is healthy to experience, articulate, and process emotions in community. Especially in difficult times.

Countless trauma studies also suggest that **establishing a sense of routine in the face of stress** helps students maintain (or regain) feelings of control, ensuring that they know what to expect. Something as small as a schedule can help give structure to students’ days in times of upheaval, when very little feels familiar. Imbue online-learning rhythms into your routine: Check in at the same time of day; require reading assignments during a set period; build into your schedule times for debriefing, sharing stories of solidarity, or moments of mindfulness. Knowing what to expect helps calm students and quell concern.

Even as you are helping your students through this difficult time, be sure to honor your own limits as well. **Secondary traumatic stress**, or compassion fatigue, occurs in helping professionals who are routinely exposed to others’ traumas. **Stress changes our brains and behaviors**, making emotional regulation much harder to achieve. This doesn’t just mean that the young people we teach may be coming to us dysregulated; we, too, may be teaching from a place of dysregulation. When students’ traumas exacerbate our own, we may respond with a number of self-protective but misaligned mechanisms: retreating rather than reaching out, reacting with frustration, avoidance, denial.

Though paradoxical, these responses often come from a place of caring. We care about young people’s well-being, and we feel powerless to change their circumstances as we witness their pain. This—coupled with the distancing inherent in virtual education—can breed feelings of saturation, isolation, and helplessness, which are precursors to and symptoms of secondary traumatic stress.

Build into your remote working routine time away from screens. Call a colleague, friend, or family member. Get outside if you are able. Read. Cook. Write letters. Protect your emotional reserves so that you may receive students’ distress in a way that meets them where they are, validates what they’re going through, and promotes everyone’s attainment of—and attunement to—emotional regulation.

Know, also, that **psychological studies reveal perceived support availability**—the sense that one could turn to a circle of connection for help should one need to—is critical to, and perhaps more important than, actual proximity and intervention. This means that virtual reach-outs—letting your students know that you are there and that you care—can make a real difference in their lives, no matter how inadequate it may feel to you.

In my community, an elderly couple sit in their car in a grocery store parking lot too afraid to walk inside. A young mother takes their list and returns with an overflowing cart. Musicians gather in living rooms and offer virtual house concerts. Yogis Zoom meditation courses to reduce stress.

All around us, there are helpers. People who remind us of breath, of melody, of humanity.

Remember that education transcends test scores and curricular continuity. Sing out in your own way—fostering connections across generations, time, and space. We need each other, now, and our joining together is itself a defense—an inoculation—against that which seeks to divide us.

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May we not lose this boon of caring on the other side of the COVID-19 bell curve.

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