

Trauma Is a Word—Not a Sentence

Kristin Souers and Pete Hall

By building a culture of safety in schools, we can give students and educators living with trauma the resources and support they need to thrive.

Sarah is 9 years old and lives with her Aunt Jenny. Her aunt works nights, so Sarah has to stay at the babysitter's house while her aunt is at work. Sarah has been sexually abused by the sitter's older nephew for two months. She is scared to tell the sitter or her aunt for fear she will be sent to live in a foster home.

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Joey just learned that his parents are getting divorced. He will be a 9th grader next year and was really excited about attending high school with his friends. Because of the divorce, however, he was told he will be moving and going to a new school.

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Amelia has been a teacher for 15 years, and when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, she was forced to change all her teaching strategies and switch to an unfamiliar online platform. To add to her stress, Amelia's mother was diagnosed with the virus, and Amelia has been struggling to provide financial and emotional support from a distance.

Stress, Trauma, and the Mess of Life

These three scenarios have one thing in common: high stress. Each person is trying to maneuver through the *mess of life*, experiencing their own unique version of trauma. Trauma has typically been seen as a mental health issue and the responsibility of counselors to address. We now know that it is much more, and that it impacts us *all* in a variety of ways.

In the late 1990s, Drs. Felitti and Anda led a study of adverse childhood experiences that became known as the ACE Study (Felitti et al., 1998). This study brought awareness about the high prevalence of trauma and the impact it can have on our health and wellness. It also showed us that trauma is not simply found in a checklist of terrifying events. We all respond to stressful and sometimes scary events in different ways. The key is that we are mindful of these different reactions and that we keep an open mind when working with individuals who have experienced trauma. When an event renders a person incapable of coping, it causes emotional dysregulation and impairs functioning. Over time and gone unsupported, it can have a significant impact on health and development.

Trauma is more widespread than most of us suspect. There is no bubble wrap to protect us from it—it affects us all, it is universal, and it is nondiscriminatory. Various stressors that are unpredictable, scary, and unsafe impact how we function, how we persist, and yes, how we both learn and teach.

How Does Stress Impact Us?

When we experience stressors, our bodies and brains move to a survival state in order to escape danger (real or perceived). In this dysregulated mode, the brain orders the release of chemicals (adrenaline and cortisol, in particular) that aid in the short-term behaviors that result in safety-seeking and survival (think *flight-fight-freeze*). The psychologist

Daniel Siegel refers to this as being in our "downstairs brain"—and in the school setting, this part of our brain ejects us from the learning mode, rendering us unable to teach or learn (Siegel & Bryson, 2012).

Biologically, being in the "downstairs brain" means we are flooded with stress hormones that wreak havoc on our brains and bodies, especially when released at high levels or over extended periods of time. This can have short-term and long-term ramifications, including diminished capacity to pay attention, to process information, to follow directions, to remember key concepts, to engage with others, to recall procedures, and to manage moods. Take a moment and consider how detrimental any (or all) of the above might be to the functioning of a typical classroom and the attainment of the teaching and learning goals we've set. Returning to the scenarios we presented at the beginning of this article:

Sarah will stay in a heightened state of alert, chronically fearful that she may lose the one stable home she has ever had. Further, she is sleep-deprived as a result of the abuse and worry. This can impact her ability to stay on task and remain in the learning mode at school.

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Joey's anticipation of losing his friends and starting a new school leads to an increase in anger, acting out, and overall rebellion against his situation. His behavior could result in disciplinary consequences and further isolation from his classmates and teachers.

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The stress associated with Amelia's predicament leads her to isolate and withdraw from the people who need her the most: her family, her students, and her colleagues. The ripple effect of her stress response starts to negatively impact her students' sense of connection and safety, causing her to have less patience, to miss signals from them, and to struggle to maintain focus on her professional responsibilities.

Creating a Culture of Safety

As educators, we cannot stop trauma from happening. We can, however, create a safe place for ourselves and our children to go, regardless of what might be impacting us. We can build a culture of safety—a nest, if you will—for the adults and students of our districts, our schools, our classrooms, and even our virtual environments. We developed the concept of a "culture of safety" to engage education professionals in the idea that we can't be effective in our teaching or our learning if we haven't yet established an environment where everyone feels safe to speak up and to engage in a love of learning. This culture of safety is critical in helping students and educators develop effective coping skills and resilience so we can manage the stress—the *mess of life*—in order to thrive (Hall, 2020).

Very simply, a culture of safety is comprised of three elements:

1. **Safety.** In a true nest, students and adults arrive at an environment that is free of bullying, violence, and any other threat to their physical safety. They also have permission to be who they are—to be and feel vulnerable; to trust one another; to experience respect, celebration, inclusion, potential, uniqueness, and emotional freedom. Examples of this provision of safety are establishing connections with every student, providing rituals and routines, and having protocols in place that communicate expectations and support.
2. **Predictability.** Stress responses are often heightened when faced with the unknown. When interactions, conditions, and expectations are predictable, students and adults are more likely to remain regulated. Predictable settings include increased sense of trust, clear communication plans, proactive practices, and an unambiguous focus on the mission.
3. **Consistency.** A consistent environment also contributes to a culture of safety. One of the most critical elements of a consistent environment is having staff agree on procedures, policies, and practices for whole-school success. When staff consent to these practices, it means they agree to implement and support them. They see the practices

as valuable and commit as a team to enforce them in their daily actions. This includes understanding the intent of their actions, the common language they use, a mantra that all students embrace, and a relentless attitude that everyone will be successful ... no matter what.

Within a culture of safety, the likelihood decreases that members of the school community become dysregulated, head into their "downstairs brains," and experience harmful stresses. When we, as professionals and curators of this trauma-invested environment, have provided a safe, predictable, and consistent space, our teammates, colleagues, and students can trust that we will help them through whatever struggles they may be facing. Trauma-invested practice is a philosophy and a mindset that every staff and student matters. Everyone deserves to thrive and become their best self, and we are committed to ensuring we are doing our best to make that happen.

In a culture of safety, here's what Sarah, Joey, and Amelia might do:

Sarah would have solid relationships with school personnel and could safely access them for help in protecting her and helping her custodial aunt find a safer place for her to be.

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Joey would share with his friends and teachers what is happening at his home, and together they could find a plan to help Joey feel secure about this difficult transition.

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Amelia would be able to share the stresses she feels and ask for help, trusting that her colleagues would empathize with her and support her through these trying times.

Again, establishing a culture of safety does not stop the mess of life from happening, but it does increase the likelihood that we all stay in our "upstairs brain," the prefrontal cortex where we can think, process, reason, and interpret the world rationally. In that place, we're biologically and emotionally prepared to handle life's curveballs, even when they're unpredictable (which they often are).

Entering a culture of safety allows us to trust that we are OK in school; liberated from fear; and freed to learn, teach, connect, and be our best selves. It offers a reprieve from the tumult of the outside world. In that environment we can thrive, cultivate the skills of self-awareness and regulation, and build the resilience necessary to help us manage the mess.

Mindset Matters

Establishing a culture of safety requires, first and foremost, a shift in our mindsets (Souers & Hall, 2016). It is the belief that *all* our staff and students have potential. It is the commitment to finding the *awesome* in each of them. It is the willingness to work together to ensure that everyone succeeds. It is the promise to remain strength-oriented instead of focusing on the negative. It is moving outside our comfort zones to reach every student. It is about sharing our intentions. It is giving ourselves permission to table our beliefs about how things *should* be and celebrate how they *are*.

As the adult professionals in this trauma-invested environment, we must do everything within our power to remain emotionally regulated. Especially in the midst of chaos, stress, and unpredictability, the adults' mindsets and ability to stay in their "upstairs brains" are essential.

One way to ensure our regulation is to be aware of our triggers—events, actions, circumstances, and interactions that throw us off, that disrupt us, and that dysregulate our emotional equilibrium. Being mindful of them helps us and our students to make choices that are helpful, healthy, and safe. In our experience, we have found five key causes for triggers:

Low energy: When we are exhausted, lacking proper sleep, or overwhelmed by stress, we are less likely to have patience and tolerance. Our fuses are shorter. The best way to address this is to *own it*. Let your colleagues and students know that you are not your best self and request some grace. This takes the mystery out of what is affecting you and minimizes the chances that they personalize your behavior.

Our histories: We all have different experiences and ways of managing those experiences, and these influence how we interpret and understand what's happening around us. When someone acts in a way that is incongruous with our understanding, we may perceive that as threatening to our worldview. Knowing our histories and positioning them in the context of our surroundings can help us remain regulated in the midst of change.

Belief sets: Our beliefs about education, behaviors, parenting, priorities, respect ... you name it, they influence how we perceive the world around us. It's pretty easy to get caught up in the negative with a parent, colleague, student, or supervisor about why and how we see things. A key mindset for educators to adopt is, "We all do the best we can with what we know and the tools we have." We need to remind ourselves not to take things personally and to focus on the goal and purpose of our role. The openness of this approach helps us to remain judgment-free when interacting with others.

Expectations: When we expect something to happen and it doesn't, it can serve as a huge source of frustration and disruption. Student behavior, academic performance, a colleague's follow-through, or a parent communication plan are among the prime candidates for letting us down. The reality is that you are where you are, and the only way to move forward is to accept that. Lamenting what isn't working runs the risk of shutting us down and halting movement. In any given moment, remember to identify where you are and what you're trying to accomplish—what is the purpose and intent behind my actions? What am I ultimately trying to achieve and how can I work collaboratively with this person in achieving that goal?

Fear: Sometimes, we get stuck in that place of inaction because something bad *might* happen. Fear of the unknown, fear of a negative reaction, fear of losing our jobs, fear of looking incompetent ... the list goes on and on, with one thing in common: we're focusing on things we cannot control. Instead, attend to what we're in charge of: our mindset, our goals, our next step, our willingness to embrace challenges as opportunities for growth.

Trauma Doesn't Have to Be a Sentence

When Sarah reaches out to the staff at her school, they embrace her request, contact her Aunt Jenny, and all parties work together to resolve the unsafe situation she is in. Sarah's safety and her need to be protected supersede any other competing influences. Her aunt requests a day shift at her work, allowing her to be home in the evenings to watch Sarah directly.

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Joey's teachers appreciate that he confides in them his fears about arriving at a new school and missing his friends. One teacher launches a video-pal partnership with one of Joey's former neighborhood middle school teachers, and Joey maintains contact with his peer group, easing the transition significantly. Further, the school works with Joey to put a plan in place to get him acquainted with his new school, and they help to establish a set of supports for him there to ease these tough transitions in his life.

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Amelia breaks down in a team meeting, explaining to her colleagues the immense pressure she feels. With open arms, her colleagues devise a plan to share the workload, reschedule meetings to allow Amelia to make medical appointments for her mother, and discuss ways to support each other emotionally. The new year has started out on a positive note.

Trauma, stress, the mess of life—these are everywhere, they are inevitable, and they impact us in all sorts of ways. How we manage the disruptions is up to us, and taking the proactive steps of understanding the biology of how the brain responds to stress, nurturing a culture of safety in our work environments, tending to our mindsets, and building

awareness of our own triggers can help us remain emotionally regulated. Only then can we work together to foster the resilience in ourselves and others to navigate the unpredictable and turbulent experience of life.

Trauma-invested practice is, more than anything else, the art of being human and bringing the human element back into education (Souers & Hall, 2018). When we are hit with stressors, we change. However, with proper support and resilience, that doesn't have to mean we're forever damaged—we can mitigate the negative impacts of the mess of life. After all, trauma is a word, not a sentence. We owe it to all the Sarahs, the Joeys, and the Amelias to be there for each other.

Reflect & Discuss

- What does being a trauma-invested school mean to you?
- What are the triggers that send you into your "downstairs brain"? What strategies do you use to emotionally regulate during stressful times?
- How can your school or district create a culture of safety for those living with trauma? How might this look virtually?

References

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[Kristin Souers](#) is a licensed mental health counselor in Spokane, Washington. [Pete Hall](#) is a former school principal in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho. For more information about their work, [visit their website](#). Follow them on Twitter [@KristinKSouers](#) and [@EducationHall](#).