Five Ways to Support Students Affected by Trauma

Teachers can help students recognize their strengths and build resilience.

BY LEA WATERS, TOM BRUNZELL | **AUGUST 13, 2018**

For some students, school is not just a place of learning and growth but also a refuge from abuse.

Data suggest that, on average, every classroom has at least one student affected by trauma. According to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, close to 40 percent of students in the U.S. have been exposed to some form of traumatic stressor in their lives, with sexual assault, physical assault, and witnessing domestic violence being the three most prevalent.

These types of stressors, known as complex trauma, have the added wound of being perpetrated by a person with whom the child or teen has an ongoing relationship. The very people who are supposed to support and protect are those who wound and abuse. This leads to continuing states of grief, loss, abandonment, and neglect as well as persistent anxiety, fear, and depression—all at a time when the brain is in crucial stages of development.

For some young people, school is the only place in their lives where they know they are safe and can form trusted, enduring relationships. It is, therefore, a cruel irony that many students who are affected by trauma also have trouble engaging at school. They may attend school with the best of intentions, hoping to form friendships, feel connected to their teachers, and succeed at the day's tasks. Yet they can find themselves defiant, demanding, and disengaged—unable to learn and confused about why they can't relate and bond with others.

What do the latest scientific findings from the fields of traumatology, neuroscience, and positive education tell us about how to best help students who are affected by trauma? Below, we highlight some of the new practices that teachers can use to not only help students heal but also

help them grow.

Healing and repair

The new field of "trauma-informed learning" has made great strides in helping teachers to better understand the developmental, emotional, and social challenges that students who are impacted by trauma face at school. While teachers are not mental health professionals, trauma-informed learning trains teachers in therapeutic approaches that can be woven into the classroom to redress the delayed development, underdeveloped neural pathways, and over-regulated nervous systems that students experience as a result of trauma.

For example, teachers can directly teach students about their body's own stress activation response and help them find techniques to regulate their heart rate, body temperature, and blood pressure. Teaching through rhythm—for example, learning about math to the beat of a drum, reading an English text while riding an exercise bike, or having a disciplinary conversation while walking around the school yard together—is now an accepted classroom technique that assists trauma-affected students to regulate their nervous system through rhythmic movement.

Feeling calmer in class has the knock-on effects of helping students get along better with others, think more clearly, and stay on task. These approaches nurture students' stamina and persistence, allowing them to better deal with frustration, which benefits their social behavior in class and their capacity to take on greater academic challenges. This is indeed a hopeful approach.

Growth and strength

Trauma-informed education has helped teachers to evolve from the question of "What is wrong with this student?" to "What has this student been through?" In the field of positive psychology, we add a further question: "What does this student need to reach their potential?" This allows teachers to extend the focus from what is wrong, to what is needed, to what is possible. Building the mental health and academic capacities of students affected by trauma requires more than repairing psychological disorder and developmental delays—it requires the dual mantra of healing *and* growth. Of repairing *and* rising up.

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work on building our strengths. Indeed, growing the psychological strengths of a student affected by trauma can be a core part of healing their psychological struggles.

Working with students who are affected by trauma requires schools to assist in providing individual counseling services, safety and crisis planning, behavior plans, self-care plans to address triggers, and case management. Most of these services are not provided by the classroom teacher, yet the teacher is the person who spends the most time with trauma-affected students. A key way in which positive psychology adds to the trauma-informed strategies above is by empowering teachers in the classroom to help their students on a daily basis.

Here are five teaching techniques that you can use in your class, knowing that these approaches also assist your mainstream students.

1. Positive relationships. Trauma-affected students have more relationship challenges to navigate than most. These students can be dealing with harmful relationships at home and then come to school to manage relationships not only with their teachers but also with social workers, police officers, and clinicians—all while living out their daily lives.

It is critical that we help these students feel safe and trusting where possible, so they learn to develop social intelligence and seek out positive bonds with others. Teachers may be the only people who help these students learn what a healthy, supportive relationship feels like. Building relational trust involves simple teaching practices such as smiling, sharing parts of your life with your students, getting to know your students as individuals, and using yourself as a role model of a reliable and regulated adult.

2. Positive physical space. The physical layout and look of your classroom can be used to build positive emotions. Putting up positive visuals and quotes can inspire creative thinking and teamwork in your students. Increased natural light or soft lighting can enhance an open, warm, and relaxing environment.

Consider how the furniture and seating is arranged in your class. Is it helping students to feel safe and connected? You could also bring plants into the room or create a mindfulness corner, a dedicated space that students can visit when they need to regulate their stress response. The

corner can include a bean bag, mindful coloring books, squeeze toys, noise-cancelling headphones, and more.

3. Positive priming. Following the research of Barbara Frederickson, you can use simple priming techniques to foster positive emotions such as contentment, pride, awe, and wonder in class.

Brain breaks are one helpful technique. The teachers who work with us have found that brain breaks are most effective when students reflect on the type of energy they need at that moment for learning: *Escalating* brain breaks build positive energy and emotions such as joy, happiness, and wonder (e.g., clapping games, thumb wars, laughter yoga, racing around the desk), while *de-escalating* brain breaks build calm emotions such as contentment and serenity, which help a student to feel safe and focused (e.g., silently tracing the movements of a partner, triangle breathing, playing music or repeating mantras, and body movements such as shoulder shrugging or pumping your toes inside your shoes).

You can also use positive primers to boost positive emotion when students first enter the classroom (such as by greeting them with the healthy touch of a handshake or a high five), during transitions (by turning transition routines into a silent game such as "follow the leader"), or during independent work breaks (by having students deliberately savor their accomplishment and share with a peer).

According to Fredrickson's theory, helping your students build up their bank account of positive emotions over time changes their brain to help them learn more effectively, form better relationships, and become more resilient. Next time you are planning a lesson, think about how you can use positive primers throughout the learning experience.

4. Using character strengths. Teaching strengths in schools has been shown to increase achievement and well-being. All students, especially trauma-affected students, need opportunities to identify, recognize, practice, and use their character strengths, which include qualities like kindness, humor, creativity, and bravery.

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Ways to help students learn about their own strengths and the strengths of others include strengths surveys (if their literacy skills allow), strengths cards, and strengths spotting exercises —like identifying strengths in their heroes or playing a secret agent game where they are invited to "spy" on a fellow student to identify the strengths of that student. To teach about particular strengths, you could focus on stories in English and Humanities curriculums where characters or historical figures displayed those strengths. Strengths can also be developed through performing arts, sports, and other co-curricula.

5. Building resilience. Sadly, you cannot always impact the life of a student outside of school, but you can teach resilience strategies that help a student affected by trauma to gain a better understanding of their situation and to counteract the negative messages of shame they often internalize.

Students can practice resilience skills through role plays that help them to act out skills such as setting boundaries and verbalizing their feelings, all while in the safety of a classroom. Literature, poetry, and song lyrics can help students identify examples of resilient thinking—for example, Ariana Grande's song "No Tears Left to Cry" following the London terrorist attack at her concert. Analyzing the ways in which media figures, sports heroes, and other high-profile people explain their successes and failures showcases the difference between optimism and pessimism.

Teachers can also use moments in the learning process when students feel frustration or self-doubt to coach them on how to dispute their pessimism and automatic negative thinking (*"I can't do this"*; *"I'm dumb"*) to make room for optimism and constructive thinking (*"Maybe I'm tired and I need a break"*; *"I solved the problem last week and I can do it again"*; *"It takes me a little longer than others, but I've come a long way"*). Learning resilience skills can provide an internal psychological buffer for students when they are outside of school, as well as providing empowering experiences at school.

Every teacher wants to positively impact the lives of their students. For students who are affected by trauma, the teacher plays an even more vital role. The introduction of positive psychology into the classroom has huge potential to change the trajectories of the lives of many of these young people by moving beyond repair to also inspire growth.

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Lea Waters, A.M., Ph.D., is an academic researcher, psychologist, author, and speaker who specializes in positive education, parenting, and organizations. Professor Waters is the author of the Visible Wellbeing elearning program that is being used by schools across the globe to foster social and emotional elearning. Professor Waters is the founding director and inaugural Gerry Higgins Chair in Positive Psychology at the Centre for Positive Psychology, University of Melbourne, where she has held an academic position for 24 years. Her acclaimed book *The Strength Switch: How The New Science of Strength-Based Parenting Can Help Your Child and Your Teen to Flourish* was listed as a top read by the Greater Good Science Center in 2017.

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