

POLICY BRIEF

June 5th, 2020



SCHOLARS
STRATEGY NETWORK

TREPeducator.org/covid-19-ed-conference

Facing Trauma in Our Students and Ourselves in the Time of COVID-19

by Jennifer Meade, University of Chicago

Setting the Context

In this time of COVID-19, the distance we are often able to put between our own and our students' experiences of trauma has disappeared. We are *co-processing* and *co-experiencing* grief, loss, anxiety and worry about the present and the future along *with* our students and their families. Each of us is experiencing this health crisis in unique ways. Our histories of traumatic experiences may emerge as painful reminders of our vulnerabilities and fears. Our students and their families are experiencing these same worries and fears alongside us. Their experiences of individual trauma may be compounded by structural inequalities, issues of safety and access to resources and care that our professional privileges may shield us from to some degree. Despite these stressors, as professionals we are expected to be leaders and critical sources of support in such times of crisis. To do so requires nurturing ourselves and putting our own mask on first now more than ever before.

Therefore, we must be aware of the possibility for secondary trauma, also known as “vicarious traumatization,” “compassion fatigue,” or “trauma exposure response” and how this type of traumatization can affect our ability to handle the stresses and emotions of our students. In her book *Trauma Stewardship*, social worker and activist Laura van Dernoot Lipsky introduces the concept of trauma stewardship as “the entire conversation about how we come to do this work, how we are affected by it, and how we make sense of and learn from our experiences (van Dernoot Lipsky & Burk, 2009a).”¹

In the best of times, we are a holding environment for our students, absorbing their joys and their sufferings whether we intend to or not. In this time of COVID-19, we are on the frontlines of our students' anxieties, while simultaneously experiencing our own. The notion of

Evidence-Based Guidance for How Schools Can Respond to A National Mental Health Crisis in the Wake of COVID-19

stewardship becomes even more essential in these unprecedented times. To support our students in processing their grief and loss and aid them in managing their stress and anxiety, we must also allow ourselves the space to process *our* grief and loss and manage *our* own stress and anxiety. To riff on the biblical proverb, *Educator, heal thyself*.

Understanding How Trauma Manifests in Our Students and in Ourselves

There is an inseparable brain and body connection in how we respond to trauma that stems from our autonomic nervous system (ANS). The ANS has two distinct components, the sympathetic nervous system and the parasympathetic nervous system. It is our sympathetic nervous system that triggers a *fight* or *flight* response to a perceived threat. This response is probably quite familiar to most educators and school-based mental health providers who have dealt with a student in a state of intense agitation. The parasympathetic nervous system, sometimes called the *rest and digest* system, is responsible for slowing our heart rate and lowering our blood pressure after our sympathetic nervous system is activated, returning us to a place of balance or *homeostasis*. There are two primary ways in which we experience our parasympathetic nervous system, from a place of safety and connectedness (the ideal place from which to learn), or from a primordial place of quiet, shutdown and collapse. In this time of COVID-19, many of us find ourselves in this state of shutdown and collapse more frequently, sleeping more, lacking energy, and unable to motivate ourselves to tackle the grand projects we thought we might when the pandemic began. This is a protective state, similar to how an animal lies still in the hopes that it will not be noticed and therefore, eaten. People who experience trauma often go to this protective place in the hopes that if they can become invisible, they will not be noticed and therefore, harmed.

These nervous system responses show up in a myriad of ways in our classrooms and mental health settings, as well as in ourselves. When our nervous system is in an optimal, *well-regulated* place, we feel loved, safe, open to the world and ready to take in new information and new experiences. We are able to communicate and connect with others. As educators, this is where we want our students—and ourselves—to be. When our nervous system is in a suboptimal, *dysregulated* place, it shows up in behaviors first before thoughts. It is important to remember that all behavior is functional and adaptive, even if that behavior is frustrating.

Moving from Dysregulation to Co-Regulation

We often assume that children walk into school feeling safe, and that educators, school-based mental health providers, and other school staff do the same. Unfortunately, that was not the

Evidence-Based Guidance for How Schools Can Respond to A National Mental Health Crisis in the Wake of COVID-19

truth before the pandemic hit and will be far from the truth as we reopen schools. Our own feelings of worry and anxiety are a functional response to perceptions of danger from a virus we know less about than we would like. For many of us, our go-to response to these feelings of distress would be social connection, but this coping tool has been taken from us when we need it most, adding to our sense of dysregulation.²

With so many things outside our locus of control, one of the most powerful tools we have at our disposal is our understanding of our nervous system and our ability to regulate it. Author and licensed clinical social worker Deb Dana has spoken about sharing our regulation with others as “a gift we can give.”³ Regulating our nervous systems starts with the understanding that committing to our own wellness is a way to honor ourselves and serve others. It gives us permission to engage in self-care and community care, responding to our own needs while engaging with our passions.

The good news is *we can* regulate our own nervous systems and we can help our students regulate theirs. We can stimulate a parasympathetic response with tools that do not take a lot of time but can reap tremendous benefits for us and our students such as:

- grounding ourselves in the sensory world, through touch, sight, sound, smell, and taste.
- diaphragmatic breathing (also known as abdominal breathing)
- mindfulness (combining breath with a mindful focus on the present moment)
- guided imagery and visualization
- progressive muscle relaxation

As educators and school-based mental health professionals, we can teach our students about their nervous systems and normalize rather than demonize their responses. Students can be taught a shared language to identify their nervous system states and peers can be coached to support one another in moving from one state to another. As we move forward into this new, uncharted territory together, investing the time to make regulating our nervous systems a daily practice is something we can control that is likely to benefit our students and ourselves, building shared resilience in a time of uncertainty.⁴

Jennifer Meade is the Director of the School Social Work Program and an adjunct instructor at the University of Chicago’s School of Social Service Administration. In addition, she is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker and School Social Worker. Her focus areas are special education, family resilience and school-community partnerships.

Evidence-Based Guidance for How Schools Can Respond to A National Mental Health Crisis in the Wake of COVID-19

¹ Lipsky, L. V., & Burk, C. (2009). *Trauma stewardship: An everyday guide to caring for self while caring for others*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

² Porges, S. W. (2020). The COVID-19 pandemic is a paradoxical challenge to our nervous system: A polyvagal perspective. *Clinical Neuropsychiatry*, 17(2), 135-138.

³ Dana, D. (2019, April 5). *The Polyvagal Theory in the Classroom*. YouTube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nq6jUJE5o4U>

⁴ Additional resources suggested by author: American Council of School Social Workers COVID-19 Resources: <https://acsw.org/COVID-19Resources.html>; The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning: An Initial Guide to Leveraging the Power of Social and Emotional Learning as You Prepare to Re-Open and Renew Your School Community https://casel.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/CASEL_Leveraging-SEL-as-You-Prepare-to-Reopen-and-Renew.pdf; National Alliance for Grieving Children COVID-19 Resources: <https://childrengrieve.org/about-us/news/covid-19>; National Child Traumatic Stress Network COVID-19 Resources: <https://www.nctsn.org/resources/trauma-informed-school-strategies-during-covid-19>; School Social Work Association of America COVID-19 Resources: <https://www.sswaa.org/covid-19-resources>