Early Identification of Triggers in Childhood Trauma

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OBJECTIVES

• Define trauma, trauma reminders, and traumatic stress reactions.

• Identify minimum of 3 impacts of trauma on individual.

• Recommend minimum of 2 strategies to minimize impact of psychological trauma.
Exercise
Pick a partner
Partner A/Partner B
Face each other
What is Trauma

A traumatic event is one in which a person experiences, witnesses or is confronted with:

- Actual or threatened death
- Serious injury
- Threat to the physical integrity of self or another
Responses to a traumatic event may include:
- Intense fear
- Helplessness
- Horror
- Attachment
Students with emotional and behavioral health concerns have poor school-related and long-term outcomes

- Low overall academic achievement
- Higher rates of suspension and expulsion
- High rates of absenteeism
- Highest incidence of contact with juvenile justice system
- Low graduation rates
- Poor psychosocial outcomes
• Acute traumatic experience versus chronic traumatic experiences
• Different people can view the same traumatic experience differently.
• Traumatic experiences impact how a person assesses threat and their automatic strategies for self-protection.
• Sometimes it limits how a person copes with stress.
Exercise
A CLOSER LOOK AT PROBLEMATIC COPING

• **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)** is a diagnosis that helps explain reactions to trauma.

• Common traumatic stress reactions include:
  - Intrusive thoughts
  - Re-experiencing
  - Avoidance
  - Negative thoughts & feelings
  - Dissociation
  - Hyper/hypo arousal
Building Trust

• Trauma can interrupt the process of building trust.

• Basic needs may not be met early in life and undermine the development of secure attachment.

• The brain becomes hardwired to assess for threat and more automatically uses the “survival brain” instead of the “learning brain”.

Photo Credit: http://communityresiliencecookbook.org/your-body-brain/
UNDERSTANDING SELF & OTHERS

• Trauma can undermine the development of a healthy level of autonomy.

• Infants often control the environment with tantrums and melt downs.

• Infants don’t know how to express their feelings with words.
STUCK IN THE PAST

- Trauma can lead to regressed behavior or underdeveloped skills
- Emotion regulation and executive functioning deficits may make daily functioning difficult and decision making processes problematic.
- Attempts to communicate may become frustrating and lead to aggressive behavior.
IDENTIFYING TRAUMA

• Understanding the 3 E’s (events, experiences, and effects) provide a foundation for identifying the impact of trauma in the classroom.
  – Events are the traumatic incidents that have happened to the child
  – Experiences refer to the child’s responses to traumatic events
  – Effects refer to functional impairment that may occur related to the trauma but be compounded by other stressors
    • Changes in behavior
    • Disproportionate response to stress
REMINDERS OF TRAUMA & EARLY WARNING SIGNS

• Trauma reminders (also referred to as triggers) can be anything that reminds the person of the trauma both consciously and unconsciously. This includes:
  – A person/gender/race
  – Tone of voice and/or touch
  – Emotional connection
  – Similar situation

• Triggers are often present prior to a person entering crisis mode.

• Early warning signs are behaviors a person shows BEFORE entering crisis mode. May include talking loudly, profanity, and numerous other non-life threatening actions that are escalated but do not require immediate physical intervention to de-escalate.
• Resilience is the ability to experience a difficult life situation and recover.
• Individual and environmental factors impact the development of resilience.
• Healthy coping skills for traumatic experiences can be learned and help to foster resilience. Strategies include:
  
  ▪ Practicing mindfulness exercises that involve regulating breathing and increasing general awareness.
  ▪ Learning verbal and nonverbal communication skills for expressing anger.
  ▪ Practicing strategies for reading situations accurately and staying safe when emotionally overwhelmed.
  ▪ Education that increases understanding of the impact of trauma.
  ▪ Opportunities to connect with others who can model healthy ways of coping.
  ▪ Addressing underlying emotional difficulties such as depression and anxiety.
PREPARING FOR DE-ESCALATION

• Recognize how trauma triggers and traumatic stress reactions are contributing to escalation.
• Threatening behavior toward an individual having a traumatic stress reaction will further activate their “survival brain” and potentially lead to a less safe environment.
• Explore where options can be given in an escalating situation to avoid powerlessness that leads to aggressive behavior.
• Consider expanding perception of resistance and disobedient behavior.
PRACTICING COMMUNICATION

• Use Verbal and nonverbal communication that re-assure a person the safest possible outcome is being sought.
• Modeling calm and controlled communication
• Communication skills that are firm while indicating the other person was heard can potentially prevent perceived injustices.

- Calm tone
- Reflection/Paraphrase
- Shame attenuation
- Announcing steps of interaction
- Clearly explaining how to de-escalate the situation
RESOURCES AND REFERENCES

• National Child Traumatic Stress Network Educator’s Toolkit

• Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools (CBITS)
  – http://cbitsprogram.org/

• Trauma Grief Component Therapy for Adolescents (TGCT-A)


• National Center for Mental Health and Juvenile Justice
  – Strengthening Our Future: Key Elements to Developing a Trauma-Informed Juvenile Justice Diversion Program for Youth with Behavioral Health Conditions