

Practical Strategies for Trauma Informed Learning Environments

The impact of trauma on students with disabilities and their progress toward achieving postsecondary employment success can be substantial. And while the experience of trauma is unique to each individual, typical manifestations of it include having learning difficulties, struggling to regulate emotions, demonstrating impulsive behaviors, showing disruptive or defiant behavior, lacking motivation, and being absent from school. Use the strategies below to help mediate the effects of trauma on students' education and employment experiences and create a supportive environment where all can flourish.

ENVIRONMENT

Create a safe environment

Learning environments should be spaces where everyone feels welcome, respected, and valued. This can include having a designated space for everyone to work as well as space to store personal belongings.

Provide spaces to take a break

This could be a comfortable chair in a corner of the classroom or a staff lounge area of an employment setting. During this break, students or employees can utilize self-regulation strategies that they have learned.

Implement consistent routines and procedures

A key component of a safe environment is knowing what to expect. Consistent routines and procedures create an environment that is predictable and comforting.

Plan for change

While consistency is important, change happens. Work with students or employees to develop a plan for when routines change. This could include learning a new routine in advance of its implementation or identifying which self-regulation strategy to use when plans change unexpectedly.

RELATIONSHIPS

Build positive relationships

Positive relationships build connections and a sense of community, which in turn foster resilience. Build relationships by greeting your students or employees daily and taking the time to get to know them and what they care about.

Encourage collaboration

This could be collaboration amongst classmates or co-workers as well as the cross-systems collaboration that some students need to successfully transition from school to work.

Use collaborative problem-solving

Model and practice solving problems in groups or teams. Working together to face problems often makes larger problems seem less difficult to solve.

Be mindful

Words and actions can retraumatize. If you need to address concerns with a student, have that conversation with a calm voice, neutral facial expression, and away from other students.

SELF-REGULATION AND SELF-CARE

Model and practice self-regulation and self-care

Show your students or employees that you are able to use self-regulation and self-care strategies when you are overwhelmed. Talk about what strategies work for you, and encourage your students or employees to figure out which strategies they prefer.

Create a self-care box

Self-care boxes can be physical items in a box or a virtual self-care box in the form of apps stored on a phone or tablet.

Include self-regulation and self-care in routines

Build breaks throughout the school or work day to practice meditation, yoga, or breathing exercises.

Schedule self-care

This could involve creating a calendar event with time set aside to go for a walk, practice a hobby, or listen to a guided meditation. Teach students how to use a calendar or reminder app on their devices to prompt them to care for themselves.