Common Trauma Symptoms in Students and Helpful Strategies for Educators

Trauma can have a detrimental impact on students’ functioning in the school setting. Educators need tools to identify and support students who may have experienced or are currently experiencing traumatic stress.

The front of this handout lists common trauma symptoms grouped into the following categories: **physical, cognitive, social and emotional, language and communication,** and **learning.** It is important to note that children can respond to trauma in many different ways and may not exhibit all of these symptoms. You can use this list to guide your thinking in identifying students who may have experienced trauma and providing or referring students to appropriate supports.

The back of this handout outlines strategies for working with students who may exhibit emotional or behavioral symptoms of trauma. You can use **preventative strategies** in everyday classroom interactions, **“in the moment” strategies** when students are in crisis, and **“after the moment” strategies** after a student’s behaviors and emotions have deescalated. These strategies generally target students’ **safety, positive relationships,** and **self-regulation,** and are focused on teaching **appropriate skills** and **avoiding punishment** (which may re-traumatize students).

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**Physical**

- Increased somatic complaints (e.g., headaches and stomachaches)
- Over- or under-reacting to stimuli (e.g., getting startled easily [or not at all] by bells, physical contact, doors slamming, sirens)
- Increased activity level (e.g., fidgeting, getting out of seat)
- Withdrawal from other people and activities

**Cognitive**

- Recreating the traumatic event (e.g., repeatedly talking about or "playing out" the event) or avoiding topics that serve as reminders
- Difficulties with executive function (e.g., impulse control, attention)
- Worry and fear about safety of self and others
- Dissociation (e.g., disconnected from surroundings, "spacing out")

**Social and Emotional**

- Rapid changes in heightened emotions (e.g., extremely sad to angry)
- Change in ability to interpret or respond appropriately to social cues
- Difficulties with emotion regulation and impulse control (e.g., angry outbursts, aggression, increased distress)
- Emotional numbness, isolation, and detachment

**Language and Communication**

- Language development delays and challenges
- Difficulties with expressive (e.g., expressing thoughts and feelings) and receptive language (e.g., understanding nonverbal cues)
- Difficulties with nonverbal communication (e.g., eye contact)
- Use of hurtful language (e.g., to keep others at a distance)

**Learning**

- Absenteeism and changes in academic performance/engagement
- Difficulties with authority, redirection, or criticism
- Difficulties listening and concentrating during instruction
- Difficulties with memory (e.g., may require more repititions)
- Difficulties generalizing learned material in different contexts

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1 Honsinger & Brown, 2019.
3 Strategies adapted from Honsinger & Brown, 2019.
PREVENTATIVE STRATEGIES

Safe and Predictable Environment
- Create a welcoming classroom environment (e.g., greet students by name, do show and tells)
- Post class expectations at the front of the classroom
- Display a daily schedule and explain any deviations
- Prepare students for transitions (e.g., give a signal)
- Communicate clear safety procedures

Relationship Building
- Talk to students about their hobbies and interests
- Use a respectful tone during interactions
- Involve students in developing behavior/safety plans
- Try the 2x10 strategy with challenging students (talk with the student for at least 2 minutes each day for 10 days in a row)

Self-Regulation
- Incorporate activities that build coping strategies (e.g., identifying and validating emotions, deep breathing)
- Create calming spaces or break times with constructive activities that are not used as a punishment/time-out
- Model and practice appropriate social skills
- Teach students how to name and scale their emotions (e.g., rate anger on a scale of 1-5)

“IN THE MOMENT” STRATEGIES

Safe and Predictable Environment
1. Be aware of the student’s body language, tone of voice, and emotional state
2. Direct other students to follow outlined safety procedures
3. Provide student with the opportunity to go to a safe space (e.g., meditation room, counseling office)
4. Alert appropriate support staff, when necessary

Relationship Building
1. Project calmness while approaching student using verbal and nonverbal techniques (e.g., using a respectful tone, sitting beside the student instead of standing over them)
2. Show you are listening and giving your full attention
3. Express that you care for the student and that they are safe

Self-Regulation
1. Relax before responding (deep breath, count to 10)
2. Encourage student to use relaxation and coping skills, and “comfort” objects
3. Validate student emotions (e.g., “You seem frustrated right now. Is that correct?”)
4. Assist the student in identifying reasonable and safe response options (e.g., go to the counselor’s office)

“AFTER THE MOMENT” STRATEGIES
- Provide students with a safe place to talk about what happened
- Engage in a discussion with the student that includes:
  - Praise for any relaxation or coping skills the student used
  - Appropriate responses and strategies to use if the situation arises again
  - Potential consequences or negative outcomes if negative behavior continues
  - Specific steps for successfully resuming the classroom routine
- Refer students to other resources and supports or notify appropriate school support staff, when necessary

References