



TRANSCRIPT

Trauma-Informed Strategies for Building Relationships with Students

NARRATOR

In October 2019, the Regional Educational Laboratory West convened hundreds of educators and health and mental health providers in California's Central Valley to learn from Dr. Sam Himmelstein - a researcher, psychotherapist, and youth advocate - about research-based skills for building relationships with children and youth that promote healing from trauma.

DR. SAM HIMELSTEIN

And my main thesis of what I'm going to be talking about today is that when you build an authentic and trusting relationship with somebody, whether they're an adult, a child, an adolescent, they're just much more open to you, they're much more receptive to you. So whether you want to teach them mindfulness, whether you're a therapist that wants to teach them trauma focused CBT, whether you're an educator that's teaching them math or whatever it is, they're going to be more open to you and more receptive to you when you lay the groundwork of building that actual authentic relationship.

Relationships are one of the key factors of resilience in trauma-impacted youth's lives and relationships for me as somebody in direct care, somebody who works directly with youth, directly with individuals face-to-face. Relationships are the bedrock of trauma-informed care. And what I really contend is it's not just a passive thing that happens. You can put energy into it. And when you put energy into it, you can move rapport along, move alliance along faster and get better results.

How many people here have ever seen, heard, or been told in a training, and they say, "One of the things that's really important is you have to build rapport with your clients or your students." Most of the times when I'm at those trainings, they're like, "Yeah, you got to build rapport," and then they just glide right on past that. Like, well, wait a minute, let's slow down. How do you actually do that? What are the building blocks of building rapport? What are the building blocks of an authentic relationship?

So that's what I want to talk about here. This is not an exhaustive list, but these very practical things you can do to move the line of rapport along.

NARRATOR

Himmelstein points to four critical skills adults need for building relationships with children and youth. They are attunement, authenticity, deep listening, and skillful self-disclosure.

DR. SAM HIMELSTEIN

Attunement is the internal practice of being present to what is going on inside of me. There is a book called *The Mindful Therapist* written by a guy that I really respect named Dan Siegel. And he's a psychiatrist who's in the mindfulness world. He talks a lot about interpersonal neurobiology. He talks about the practice of attunement, literally the simple practice of attuning to yourself, having a profound impact on the relationship itself.

You feel a certain way emotionally. Maybe you feel a certain way physically. That's attuning to yourself. The more you practice attuning to yourself, you get better at what Dan Siegel calls interpersonal attunement, which is attuning to the other, attuning to somebody else. Being like, "I wonder what's going on with this person, let me tune into them right there."

And authenticity is the practice of being authentic with what is going on inside of me. Why is authenticity so important particularly when we're working with youth who are marginalized, youth who are impacted by trauma? There's a very important reason, right? But when you show up over and over, and over again as yourself, as predictable, as consistent, that's...you're basically telling them, "I am a safe person, you can rely on me." What am I saying without saying it? I'm saying it's okay for me to be me, it's okay for you to be you, and I want to know that real true you." That's what the practice of authenticity is about.

Deep listening is the type of listening that can relieve the suffering of another person. You can call it compassionate listening. You do it with one intention, to help that person empty their heart. Deep listening is listening without the solution-focused mode going on. And a lot of us as adults, we love to get into that solution-focused mode particularly when a young person starts to talk with us, "what can I do to help this person right now?" It's from a good intention, right?

That's not what deep listening is, it's literally being mindful, being present, and being attuned to the other person. Isn't that amazing to say in this day and age, one of the best interventions you can do with adolescents is literally just listen to them? When you do that, you open up this portal, you open up this ability to build this relationship.

The last thing I want to talk about is an offering practice, and that's what I like to call skillful self-disclosure. The thing is, a lot of times when we're working with clients or students, we get told as therapists to not talk about ourselves and not talk about our own life information. And if we're really thinking about a true, authentic, predictable, consistent, safe relationship, that means that they have to view you as a human being. You have to find a way to humanize yourself. And we do that by sharing different things about ourselves at different times at a normal appropriate rate. That's how relationships get built.

The word skillful is important because in some fields we can overdo it, and that makes the relationship not safe. We want to make sure what we're sharing about ourselves or how we're emitting information about ourselves is appropriate, is skillful.

So, I was working with the young man, 16 years old, and he asked me this question, which even right then I know it was inappropriate. What happens in those moments when I'm practicing self-disclosure and we have a conversation like that and I don't tell him this certain bit of life information. But then as we're talking, I also disclose that I feel a lot of empathy and compassion for him. The relationship builds.

NARRATOR

Himmelstein ends his presentation with the message that healing from trauma is possible, it happens through relationships, and that effective relationship-building skills can be developed with intention and practice.

DR. SAM HIMELSTEIN

Again, not rocket science, we're just talking about attunement. We're just talking about authenticity. We're talking about deep listening, and we're talking about skillful self-disclosure. It's something that oftentimes we don't think about, and it's not intentionally garnered into our awareness. But when you do do that, you can have a very powerful impact on the young people that you work with.

NARRATOR

Dr. Himmelstein's presentation draws on this research on the importance of positive relationships between adults and youth and the four relationship-building skills adults can use in their work with children and youth.

For more information, please contact REL West at relwest@wested.org.