Basic Principles of Trauma-Informed Sex Education

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- Accurate, age-appropriate sex education
- Videos for young people, lesson plans, answers to some common questions

Learning Objectives

By the end of this session, participants will be able to:

- Explain the three types of trauma;
- Identify at least five traumatic experiences that a young person may face; and,
- List at least two areas of sex education that may trigger trauma.
What is trauma?

Definition of Trauma

An event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual’s functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.

- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)

Types of Trauma

**Acute**
A single traumatic event

**Chronic**
Multiple or prolonged traumatic events

**Complex**
Multiple or prolonged traumatic events that often occur within a caregiving system
What traumatic experiences might young people face?

**Traumatic Experiences**

- Car accident
- Bullying
- Neglect
- Violence in home/community
- Sudden/violent loss of loved one
- Natural disaster
- Physical/sexual assault
- Physical/sexual abuse
- Sudden injury/illness
- Systemic issues: (racism, classism, gender discrimination, homophobia, transphobia)
- War/political violence
- School violence/shootings
- Etc.


**Prevalence**

- 60% of the population have been exposed to crime, violence, abuse or other difficult family circumstance by age 17.
- 26% of children in the United States will witness or experience a traumatic event before they turn 4.
- Between 1 in 4 and 1 in 3 US students say they have been bullied at school; 1 in 4 have been the victims of cyberbullying.

SOURCE: National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention, 2012
Violence, Crime, and Abuse Exposure in a National Sample of Children and Youth. JAMA, 2012
KidsHealth.org, 2014
Impacts of Trauma

ACEs Study

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

- Emotional/physical/sexual abuse
- Household challenges (violence, substance abuse, divorce, etc.)
- Emotional/physical neglect
- Continued ongoing surveillance

SOURCE: Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), CDC, 2016

Trauma and the Brain

- Experiences physically alter the brain and how its main components function
- Overactive amygdala – in survival mode even when no threat is present
- Functioning of the thinking brain is reduced
- Abnormal cortisol levels
- Decreased size of brain
- Changes in connectivity of some part of the brain

Stress and Learning

- Stress response makes learning difficult
- Acute stress prevents memory storage
- Prolonged stress:
  - Trains the brain to stay stressed or escalate to a stress response quickly
  - Short circuits essential learning neural pathways
    - Self-control
    - Impulse-control
    - Memory
    - Reasoning

How can trauma manifest in young peoples lives?

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Behavior problems
- Difficulty with attachment
- Relationship problems
- Trouble controlling emotions
- Risk behaviors (substance use/sexual behaviors)
- Lethargy/fatigue

Manifestations of Trauma

- Poor physical health
- Chronic pain
- Difficulty expressing/managing emotions
- Disassociation
- Difficulty thinking clearly
- Low-self esteem/self-worth
- Etc.


Classroom Impact

- High levels of emotional upset
- Disruptive behavior
- Increased absences
- Lower GPAs
- Negative remarks in school records
- Difficulty concentrating
- Difficulty learning
- Unusually aggressive or reckless behavior
- Difficulty staying awake and alert


Trauma and Sex Education

NSES

Topics and Key Indicators

- Anatomy and Physiology: Provides a foundation for understanding basic human biology.
- Personal and Social Development: Focuses on personal development for every aspect of life, from emotional to physical, social, and moral development.
- Identity and Interpersonal Relationships: Explores the concept of identity and the importance of relationships in personal development.
- Early Childhood Development: Offers guidance on how to support children in their early years, focusing on physical, emotional, social, and cognitive development.
- Adolescent Development: Addresses the unique needs and challenges of adolescents, including issues of identity, relationships, and self-esteem.
- Adult Development: Focuses on the needs of adults, including education, lifelong learning, and personal growth.
- Sexuality Education: Provides comprehensive guidance on sex education, including content, skills, and methods for teaching.
- Health and Safety: Emphasizes the importance of health and safety education, covering topics such as nutrition, physical activity, and mental health.

This resource is designed to support educators in creating engaging, relevant, and respectful sex education curricula.
Trauma and Sex Education

1. Form groups at each key topic area.
2. Brainstorm issues/topics related to your key topic area that might trigger past trauma.
3. Be prepared to report back to the large group.

NSE

- Anatomy & Physiology
  - Gender identity
- Puberty & Adolescent Development
  - Gender identity
- Personal Safety
  - Sexual abuse
  - Sexual assault
  - Sexual harassment
  - Incest
  - Rape
  - Bullying
- Healthy Relationships
  - Dating violence
  - Boundaries
- Identity
  - Sexual orientation
  - Gender identity
  - Gender expression
- Pregnancy & Reproduction
  - Unplanned pregnancy
  - Miscarriage
  - Abortion
  - Adoption
- Sexually Transmitted Diseases & HIV
  - HIV
  - STD transmission

Processing

- What thoughts and feelings did you experience during this activity?
- Did anything surprise you?
- Why do you think it is important to be aware of these possible triggers?
- What can you do to reduce the chances your students might be triggered when discussing these topics in class?
Resources for Educators

Resources (online)

- A Guide to Trauma Informed Sex Education – Cardea Services
- A Trauma Informed Approach for Adolescent Sexual Health – Resources for Resolving Violence
- Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach - SAMHSA
- Supporting a Trauma Informed Approach – ETR
- Child Trauma Toolkit for Educators – The National Child Traumatic Stress Network
- The Learning Center - The National Child Traumatic Stress Network

Resources (in-person)

Core Skills
Full-Day Training
Trauma-Informed Approaches
Half-Day Module
Thanks! Let’s Connect!

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