Chapter 2
Increasing Trauma-Informed Awareness and Practices in Higher Education

Kristen Doughty
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5835-5064
Delaware Technical Community College, USA

ABSTRACT

Traumatic experiences across the lifespan impact an individual’s physical, social and emotional health, and cognitive development. The effects of childhood trauma carry into the educational environment and impact the functions necessary to learn and achieve academic goals. There is an increased focus on trauma informed initiatives in various public and healthcare sectors, but these initiatives are lacking in higher education. A foundational understanding of trauma and trauma informed educational practices is necessary in supporting students. This chapter provides an overview of the impact of trauma, what it means to be trauma informed, and outlines trauma informed educational strategies.

INTRODUCTION

There are many initiatives in higher education that focus on strategies to optimize student success and achievement of educational goals. Initiatives often focus on the concepts of resilience, grit and mindfulness. While all of these concepts are important in education, an understanding of trauma and trauma informed practices are the foundation upon which all other initiatives and strategies should stem from. Over the years, there has been an increase in the recognition and understanding of the long-term effects of trauma on health, social and cognitive functioning. In the 1970’s, in response to the Vietnam War and the increased awareness of domestic abuse and child abuse, there was a movement towards diagnosis and treatment for those who experienced and were negatively affected by traumatic events (Friedman, 2016; Wilson, 1994). This was the beginning of trauma informed care and practices. Now, trauma informed care and practices have begun to transcend from health and social service settings into governmental and educational settings.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-2177-9.ch002
Increasing Trauma-Informed Awareness and Practices in Higher Education

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA] (2014) defines trauma as “an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual’s functioning and physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being” (p.7). Anyone can experience or be impacted by an event. Trauma does not discriminate; it affects people of all cultures, races, gender, backgrounds and can occur at any stage in life. (SAMHSA, 2014). Types of trauma can include sexual, physical, mental abuse, neglect, and witnessing abuse. Incidences such as terror attacks, school shootings, school violence and natural disasters have increased significantly and are also types of trauma (Lambert, Lambert, & Lambert, 2014).

An event becomes traumatic when it overwhelms an individual’s capacity to cope, resulting in fear, feelings of vulnerability and helplessness (DeCandia, Guarino & Clervil, 2014). Most individuals process the event and develop a sense of resilience that mitigates the long-lasting effects of traumatic experiences. However, those who cannot effectively process the experience may have long-term consequences.

Traumatic experiences across the lifespan can impact an individual’s physical, social and emotional health, cognitive development, and overall well-being. Research has demonstrated the impact of trauma on the development of the brain and nervous system. At birth, there are parts of the brain that are underdeveloped. The brain continues to develop into early adulthood, with the peak occurring during early childhood and adolescence. Normal brain development is sequential, with the bottom regions developing first, followed by the upper regions. The bottom of the brain includes the brainstem and midbrain regions, responsible for basic functions such as heart rate and breathing. The upper brain includes the limbic and cortex regions, responsible for higher-level functions including emotions, thinking and reasoning. Exposure to trauma can disrupt normal brain development in the mid and upper brain regions, negatively impacting development of emotional regulation, response to stimuli and sensory input, and cognitive function (Perry & Marcellus, 2018).

The response to stress is an instinct of survival. There is a normal physiological response to a perceived threat, where the body prepares to fight or run, also known as the fight or flight response. The brain has an innate system in place, and it is a total body response to the perceived threat. All physiological systems required to survive are initiated, such as heart rate, breathing rate, blood pressure and major muscles, all with the intent to either fight or flight (Child Trauma Academy, 2002). An individual that has not been impacted by trauma can turn off this response when necessary. An individual impacted by trauma is in a constant state of alertness and unable to turn off the response (Fallon, n.d.). The stress response is over-stimulated, which in turn impairs memory, impulse control, and emotional control.

Adverse Childhood Events Study

The landmark study that brought attention to the experience of trauma and its lasting effects on health and social outcomes was the Center for Disease Control (CDC)-Kaiser Permanente Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study, conducted from 1995-1997. The cornerstone of the ACE Study was its examination of long-term effects of three types of childhood abuse, as well as exposure to dysfunctional home environments. Ten categories of ACEs comprised the study. Childhood abuse categories included psychological, sexual and physical abuse. Dysfunctional home environments included categories such as exposure to substance abuse, mental illness, violent treatment of mother or stepmother, and criminal behavior. The remaining categories surveyed the occurrence of emotional and physical neglect.
10 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the product's webpage: www.igi-global.com/chapter/increasing-trauma-informed-awareness-and-practices-in-higher-education/243237?camid=4v1


Related Content

Student-Athletes as Change Agents
www.igi-global.com/chapter/student-athletes-as-change-agents/217123?camid=4v1a

Local Government and Governance in Mexico
www.igi-global.com/chapter/local-government-and-governance-in-mexico/235243?camid=4v1a

Fencism: An Unusual Political Alignment in Twitter Nigeria
www.igi-global.com/chapter/fencism/198740?camid=4v1a

Assessing the Influence of Actors on E-Government Policies: Evidences from Chile and Costa Rica Experiences
www.igi-global.com/chapter/assessing-the-influence-of-actors-on-e-government-policies/235191?camid=4v1a