

When preparing for teaching (or any interaction with students!) and desiring to be trauma-sensitive, consider this “checklist” that addresses the most common issues that arise in educational environments:



Trauma-affected individuals often have **anxiety** issues that relate to their past experience. A sense of safety can be built from predictable environments. Have you included these considerations in your lesson planning? Will you follow a pattern that helps individuals to know what to expect, and have you shared it with them in written or visual formats (posted for all to see)? How can safety, trust, and consistency be verbalized and practiced by the group?



Transitions can be hard for many people, and this is especially the case for those with emotional-relational special needs and a variety of mental health diagnoses (ADHD, ASD, etc.). How will you handle transitions in your time together? What verbal and physical cues or prompts will be given to prepare for a transition? How can you make transitions FUN, and something everyone looks forward to (include a song, silly movements, participation or leadership from the group, etc.)?



Sensory-related issues are common for trauma-affected individuals and those with special needs. What provisions can be made for those who might have difficulty with loud noises, unexpected movement, or touch-taste-smell issues around food or fragrances? Do you have a place where those who are overwhelmed can take a break without being made to feel punished? Can they initiate this break or does it have to be suggested by an authority figure? How can you give power (agency) to students so they can navigate their sensory needs while you lead the class?



Touch and personal boundaries are considerations for those with trauma or mental health diagnoses. Again, a sense of safety and predictability in the environment helps. Perhaps think about how you can communicate with the group about seeking **consent** while still encouraging positive physical connection (“*Would you prefer a handshake or a high-five?*”). If planning an activity that involves the potential of pushing limits in terms of personal boundaries and consent (think: tag or hide-and-seek type games for little ones or group work with older students), how can you address these concerns so everyone feels safe? Can someone approach you if they don’t feel comfortable?



Giving my friends some space.



Take your “temperature” before your class so you can *respond purposefully* rather than just *reacting subconsciously*. What is your own experience with trauma or childhood adversity that could be triggered by an outburst or student’s dysregulation? While we cannot prevent our own trauma-response, we can better direct our reactions if we are aware of how we tend to be affected in these moments of stress. **Mindfulness** can help us maintain a helpful tone, posture (body language is SO important), words, and general manner that can go a long way to conveying safety and security for all those in your care.



REMEMBER: Establishing a trauma-sensitive setting is not about ensuring there is nothing that may trigger a trauma response in the learning environment. (*That would be impossible!*) A trauma-informed approach is about being prepared and equipped to minimize reactions and deescalate a situation with the needed space and empathetic responses helpful for someone who may be overwhelmed or retraumatized.

So do your best to think through your lesson or activity and trust yourself... your attitude will go a long way. If you are curious and humble, asking “*What must have occurred to cause that reaction?*” for someone who may be retraumatized in a moment and acting out, rather than “*what is wrong with THEM?!*,” you can build the skills that will make thinking in trauma-sensitive ways more and more natural. Lean into your compassion and care for students... **you got this!**