

Trauma-Informed Facilitation: How to Create a Safer Space

Trauma-informed pedagogy is an approach that tries to be mindful about the ways in which adversity and trauma affect the individual bodymind's ability to be present, engaged, and responsive in the ways we commonly believe people "should" be. It is impossible to know from what someone looks or behaves like what that person has been through or is currently going through. As facilitators of dialogue, we should BOTH strive to create an environment that is stable, predictable, and loving AND be responsive to what we know about participants' needs as they arise.

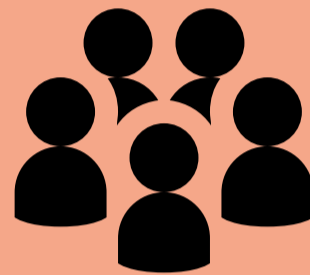


What Is "Trauma"?

"Trauma" is a complex and contested term. But all we really need to know is that trauma compromises a person's fundamental sense of **safety**. Many people struggle to feel truly safe and secure, both in their own bodies and around other people. This basic sense of bodily integrity and trust in other people is **not** the same thing as the "comfort" of one's ideas remaining unchallenged.

Why Is a "Safe Space" So Important?

"More than anything else, being able to feel safe with other people defines mental health; safe connections are fundamental to meaningful and satisfying lives. The critical challenge in a classroom setting is to foster reciprocity: truly hearing and being heard; really seeing and being seen by other people."



Bessel van der Kolk, [The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma](#), p. 354.

WAYS TO HELP PEOPLE FEEL MORE SAFE

Be Predictable

Let people know what's going to happen: Share the agenda. Preview activities. Provide content warnings.

Establish clear expectations: What kinds of interaction and performance will be required of people versus optional? What are the norms of engagement and behavior? What work will people be required to share, to what audience, and in what format? When, how, and why will people be surveilled?

Be Steady

Stay calm: Maintain an even temper and avoid major reactions. Take a break or some deep breaths if you can't trust yourself to respond calmly.

Follow through: Do what you say you will do, no matter how minor the action, and acknowledge it when you don't.

Maintain consistency: If you need to adjust expectations, give warning & an explanation.

Be Loving

Express trust: Assume without waiting for some specific kind of "evidence" that people are trying their best, telling the truth, and working hard to be good people.

Express acceptance: Let people know you are glad they are there and interested in who they are, without waiting for them to first meet a performance standard.

Affirm the person and their belonging, even as you challenge their behavior and ideas.

Embody Predictability, Steadiness, and Love

Modulate your voice to be even, not too loud, and pleasant -- if you can't, pause and wait to say something.

Smile and make eye contact.

Do not "hover" or loom over people who are seated or significantly smaller than you. Back up and/or kneel down.

Do not make sudden movements, wide gestures, or loud noises, especially in close proximity.