



# Trauma-Informed Facilitation

## CREATING A SAFER SPACE FOR DIALOGUE



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### WHAT IS TRAUMA?

Trauma is a complex and contested term. But, in general, "trauma" describes the lingering aftereffects of a psychic wound, compromising 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 SAFER 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*.) While we cannot guarantee absolute safety (a risk-free environment), we can strive to create a relatively safer space for dialogue through trauma-informed facilitation practices. It is impossible to know from what someone looks or behaves like what they have been through or are going through. Don't wait until there's "evidence" of trauma to employ trauma-informed practices! These practices are beneficial to all and will improve the dialogue even if no one present has experienced trauma.

### PRACTICES THAT CREATE A SAFER SPACE

#### 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? When? With whom? When, how, and why will people be surveilled or assessed?

#### 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, and acknowledge when you don't.

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

#### BE LOVING

**Express trust:** Assume without waiting for some 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, ≠ LOVE

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

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.

