

**CREATING A TRAUMA INFORMED
ENVIRONMENT IN THE
ONLINE POST SECONDARY CLASSROOM:
A BEHAVIOR ANALYTIC PERSPECTIVE**

**SUSAN R. WILSON, PHD, BCBA-D, LBA
PURDUE GLOBAL UNIVERSITY**

LEARNING OUTCOMES:

- **Learning Outcomes:**
- Participants will understand 'trauma' as a 'setting event' that can affect student behavior and performance in the online college classroom.
- Participants will examine strategies for creating an online environment that promotes trauma informed practices to support student learning and well-being.
- Participants will identify the importance of compassion and 'universal precautions' in structuring their classroom expectations and interactions with students.

AGENDA:

- Defining Trauma
 - Focus on the SAMSHA (2014) Conceptualization
- Adding a Behavior Analytic Conceptualization
- Application in the Post Secondary Education Online Classroom
- Comments and Questions

WHAT IS TRAUMA (BY DEFINITION)?

- Is Trauma:
 - An Explanation?
 - An internal process?
 - A stimulus?
 - A response?

DEFINING TRAUMA:

- “Individual trauma **results from** 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.”

(SAMSHA, 2014, p.11)

- “Trauma can be defined as any experience in which a person’s internal resources are not adequate to cope with external stressors ”

(Hoch, Stewart, Webb, & Wyandt-Hiebert, 2015, p. 4)

TRAUMA IS RELATED TO A HISTORY OF EXPOSURE TO AVERSIVE EVENTS

- Abandonment, neglect, or betrayal
- of trust (such as abuse from a
- primary caregiver)
- Death or loss of a loved one
- Caregiver having a life-threatening
- illness
- Domestic violence
- Poverty and chronically chaotic
- Housing and financial resources
- Automobile accident or other
- serious accident
- Bullying
- Life-threatening health situations and/or painful medical procedures
- Witnessing or experiencing community violence, including shootings, stabbings, or robberies
- Witnessing police activity or having a family member incarcerated
- Life-threatening natural disasters
- Acts or threats of terrorism (viewed
- in person or on television)
- Military combat
- Historical trauma

(Hoch et al., 2015)

LONG LASTING ADVERSE EFFECTS

- INABILITY TO:
 - Cope with daily stressors
 - Trust and benefit from relationships
 - Manage cognitive processes
 - Attention
 - Memory
 - Thinking
 - Regulate Behavior
 - Control expression of emotion

(SAMSHA, 2014, p. 12)

Getting ahead:

How might these affect classroom behavior?

ADDITIONAL POSSIBLE EFFECTS

- Changes in neurobiological make up that affect function
- Alterations in general health and well being
- Increased hypervigilance
- “Constant” state of physiological arousal
- “Numbing” as avoidance

(SAMSHA, 2014, p.12))

BEHAVIORAL EFFECTS:

- FIGHT
 - FLIGHT
 - FREEZE
-
- Adaptive / functional responses that occur in the presence of 'triggers'.
 - Manage or avoid discomfort associated with those triggers
 - Become habitual responses that lead to maladjustment

(Schmidt et al., 2008)

TREATMENT: (FROM THE SAMSHA PERSPECTIVE)

- Creating supportive environments and interactions that avoid retraumatizing
- **SIX KEY PRINCIPLES OF A TRAUMA-INFORMED APPROACH**
 - 1. Safety
 - 2. Trustworthiness and Transparency
 - 3. Peer Support
 - 4. Collaboration and Mutuality
 - 5. Empowerment, Voice and Choice
 - 6. Cultural, Historical, and Gender Issues

(SAMSHA, 2014, p. 14)

CAN WE APPROACH TRAUMA FROM A BEHAVIOR ANALYTIC PERSPECTIVE?

- I say 'YES'!!!
- In Fact 'WE MUST'
- But to do so, we must conceptualize 'Trauma' in objective, measurable terms
- And formulate a behaviorally based explanation for related response patterns

BEHAVIORISM AND CAUSES OF BEHAVIOR

- B.F. Skinner:
 - Behaviorism does not ignore thoughts and feelings
 - Behaviorism does not ignore Private Events (internal or covert behaviors)
 - Referred to the “world within the skin” (Skinner, 1974, p. 18)
 - Private events (behaviors) are no different from public events (behaviors) except for the number of people that can observe them
- Radical Behaviorism
 - Rather than seeking to explain how private events cause public ones
 - Radical Behaviorism looks for causes of all behavior in the environment

(Skinner, 1974)

TRADITIONAL UNDERSTANDING OF BEHAVIOR IN ABA

- Three Term Contingency
- A-B-C
- Antecedent-Behavior-Consequence

- Aversive event (a demand)
- Protest behavior (elopement)
- Consequence (escape from demand)

(Cooper et al. , 2020)

THE FOURTH TERM:

- **Setting Event (Bijou & Baer, 1961)**

A stimulus that impacts subsequent stimulus-Response relations

- Behavioral History; Health Factors

- **Jack Michael (1982, 2007) Introduced Establishing Operations, later called Motivating Operations**

Stimuli that momentarily affect the reinforcing (or punishing) nature of a consequence

- MO Skipped breakfast
- Antecedent I see your cookie
- Behavior I hit you and take your cookie
- Consequence Tangible reward (tastes good/ satisfies hunger)

THE FOUR TERM CONTINGENCY AND TRAUMA

History of aversive events as ‘ Motivating Operations’

MO	History of aversive experiences that create a deficit in ‘safety’
Antecedent	An environmental stimulus associated with those events (through respondent/classical conditioning)
Behavior	Response to that stimulus (Fight/Flight/Freeze)
Consequence	Avoidance of or escape from the aversive stimulus (the reinforcing value of escape/avoidance is increased related to the deficit caused by the MO)

(Bishop, 2018 ; Turner, 2018)

- A key to reducing or avoiding Trauma related behavioral responses
- Is to manipulate MO's (increase safety by environmental manipulation)
- And address Antecedents that serve as discriminative stimuli or 'triggers'
 - By eliminating
 - By teaching skills

IS BEHAVIOR ANALYSIS, IN PRACTICE, NATURALLY TRAUMA INFORMED?

- Behavior Analytic Assessment takes into account
 - History of the individual
 - Environmental contexts within which response patterns were learned
 - History of reinforcement and learning
 - Function of behaviors to serve needs and communication of needs

A BEHAVIOR ANALYTIC PERSPECTIVE AND APPLICATION

- Trauma as a stress response in reaction to a conditioned stimulus
- Even in seemingly safe situations
- Trauma as a functional behavior that is reinforced by 'felt safety'
- Elements of Operant Conditioning
- As well as Respondent/Classical conditioning

(McFarland & Bonavita, 2019)

A TRAUMA INFORMED ENVIRONMENT:

- Provides Clear rules and Expectations
- Provides Support and Structure
- Focuses on Individual Strengths
- Prompts High Probability Behaviors

(McFarland & Bonavita, 2019)

A BEHAVIOR ANALYTIC PERSPECTIVE AND APPLICATION

- Trauma as a Setting Event
- History of learning that makes it more or less likely that a behavior will occur in response to a stimulus
- Need to look beyond the A-B-C contingency to consider prior experiences that influence current responses

(Turner, 2018)

A TRAUMA INFORMED ENVIRONMENT:

- Focuses on 'Comfort' (Turner, 2018)
- (How might we operationally define that? What does a 'comfortable' setting/classroom look like?)
- Involves engineering a supportive environment that 'fills in the holes' left by MO's and avoids triggering antecedents (Kolu, 2017)

HOW MIGHT THIS ALL TRANSLATE TO THE POST SECONDARY ONLINE CLASSROOM?

Trauma-informed educators

Recognize students' actions are a direct result of their life experiences.

When their students act out or disengage, they don't ask, 'What is wrong with them?' but rather, 'What happened to them?'

This acknowledges the effect of past experience and learning on current behavior

(Huang et al., 2014)

WHAT DO YOU KNOW YOUR STUDENTS HAVE EXPERIENCED OR ARE EXPERIENCING?

How many of you have had students disclose:

- Adverse events in childhood?
- Significant loss?
- Financial and job difficulties?
- Overwork ?
- Illness— their own/significant others?
- Death of significant others?
- Mental health challenges?
- Marital/relationship discord and/or divorce?
- Victimization ?
- A serious accident or injury?
- Challenges related to COVID?
 - This is currently a shared experience and an example of something we can presume is affecting all of our students

THE 4 TERM CONTINGENCY IN THE CLASSROOM

MO :

History of aversive experiences that create a deficit in 'safety'

- **Antecedent :**
 - An environmental stimulus associated with those events (through respondent/classical conditioning)
- **Behavior:**
 - Response to that stimulus (Fight/Flight/Freeze)
- **Reinforcing Consequence:**
 - Avoidance of or escape from the aversive stimulus (the reinforcing value of escape/avoidance is increased)

MO :

History of aversive experiences that create a deficit in 'safety'

- Antecedent
 - Challenging classroom task
- Behavior
 - Procrastination
- Reinforcing Consequence
 - Escape from the task and related challenges

TRAUMA AND CLASSROOM BEHAVIOR

- Creating a trauma informed environment in the classroom is compatible with a behavior analytic perspective.
- Based on the considerations we've just reviewed, we can start to make that framework transition

A HISTORY OF ADVERSE EXPERIENCES AFFECTS LEARNING AND CLASSROOM BEHAVIOR

Fear changes thinking, feeling and behaving

Reduces curiosity and inhibits exploration and learning

Often, at baseline, in a state of low-level fear

Increased need for Structure, predictability and sense of safety

Focusing, attending, retaining and recalling may all be more difficult if in a state of arousal

Deadlines, exams and public speaking may result in activation of the stress response

Difficulty with risk taking, maintaining self esteem, and/or emotion regulation may affect performance

Results in anger, helplessness, dissociation, missed classes

(Hoch et al., 2015)

What antecedent events might increase a fear related (avoidance/escape) response?

What might those fear related (avoidance/escape) responses look like?

WHAT BEHAVIORS IN THE CLASSROOM MIGHT REPRESENT ESCAPE/AVOIDANCE?

- Difficulty focusing, attending, retaining, and recalling
- Tendency to miss a lot of classes
- Procrastination and late or missed submissions
- Challenges with emotional regulation : Emotional Reactivity
- Fear of taking risks : Reflected in behaviors such as low effort
- Expression of anxiety about deadlines, exams, group work, or public speaking
- Expressions of anger, helplessness, or withdrawal
- Withdrawal and isolation

(Hoch et al., 2015)

ELEMENTS OF A TRAUMA INFORMED CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

Recognize that Students are the expert on their own life and feelings.

Do not expect instant trust but work to build

Be absolutely trustworthy and reliable

Normalize and validate feelings and behaviors that come from experiencing adverse events

Ask students what will help them feel more comfortable and how you can best work with them.

Realize and accept that difficult behaviors have probably served students well and may be hard to give up.

Maintain appropriate boundaries (this is always important but is even more so with traumatized learners, as it contributes to a sense of safety)

(Hoch et al., 2015)

WHAT CAN WE, AS EDUCATORS DO TO CREATE A TRAUMA INFORMED CLASSROOM?

- How do we **modify our own behavior** to create supportive classroom environments and interactions that avoid triggering trauma related behavioral responses. -- particularly those that are counterproductive to educational goals?
- **SIX KEY PRINCIPLES OF A TRAUMA-INFORMED APPROACH**
 - How do these support action steps?
- 1. Safety
- 2. Trustworthiness and Transparency
- 3. Peer Support
- 4. Collaboration and Mutuality
- 5. Empowerment, Voice and Choice
- 6. Cultural, Historical, and Gender Issues

(SAMSHA, 2014, p. 14)

THE IMPORTANCE OF COMPASSION

- What is compassion?
 - A personality trait?
 - An emotion?
 - Sympathy?
 - Empathy?
 - Perspective taking? (Taylor et al., 2019)
- So many definitions! So mentalistic!
- “the feeling that arises in witnessing another’s suffering and that motivates a subsequent desire to help” (Goetz et al., 2010, p. 351)
- “the sensitivity to suffering in self and others (engagement), with a commitment to try to alleviate and prevent it (action)” (Gilbert, 2014, p. 19)

COMPASSION IN THE POST SECONDARY CLASSROOM

- Jazeiri (2019) makes the case for informing education K-Grad School with Compassion and describes four components

Awareness of suffering (cognitive component).

A sympathetic concern related to being emotionally moved by suffering (affective component).

A wish to see the relief of that suffering (intentional component).

A responsiveness or readiness to help relieve that suffering (motivational component).

Reviewed Empirical Literature on addressing Compassion with Students

Some evidence For:

Increases in a number of areas of well-being

Optimism

Self-Efficacy

Reduced emotional upset in response to stressors

TOWARD A BEHAVIORAL DEFINITION OF COMPASSION

- Proposal:
- Compassion is a learned behavior, not a personality characteristic
 - The ability to tact (label) the experience of another
 - and to modify one's own response in reaction to the behavior of that individual
 - with a goal to increase or decrease an overt behavior of that individual

“If you approach others with the thought of compassion, that will automatically reduce fear and allow an openness with other people. It creates a positive, friendly atmosphere. With that attitude, you can approach a relationship in which you, yourself, initially create the possibility of receiving affection or a positive response from the other person. And with that attitude, even if the other person is unfriendly or doesn't respond to you in a positive way, then at least you've approached the person with a feeling of openness **that gives you a certain flexibility and the freedom to change your approach as needed.**”

- HHDL XIV



UNIVERSAL PRECAUTIONS

Assumes that:

- Using trauma informed approaches universally
- Will lead to an increase in well being across individuals in an environment
- Regardless of history of each individual

- Some evidence building
- More research is needed

(Racine, 2019)

STRATEGIES TO PROMOTE A TRAUMA INFORMED CLASSROOM

- Empower Students
- Maintain High Expectations
- Express Positive Regard
- Check in with Students
- Be Prepared for Significant Anniversaries, Times of Year, etc.
- Be Sensitive to Family Structure
- Avoid Romanticizing Trauma Narratives in Subject Content
- Help Students Identify Mentors and Support Systems
 - *(Know what supports exist here at PG and refer)*
- Assist Students with Cultivating Positive Relationships
- Provide Opportunities for Helpful Participation

(Davidson et al. , 2017)

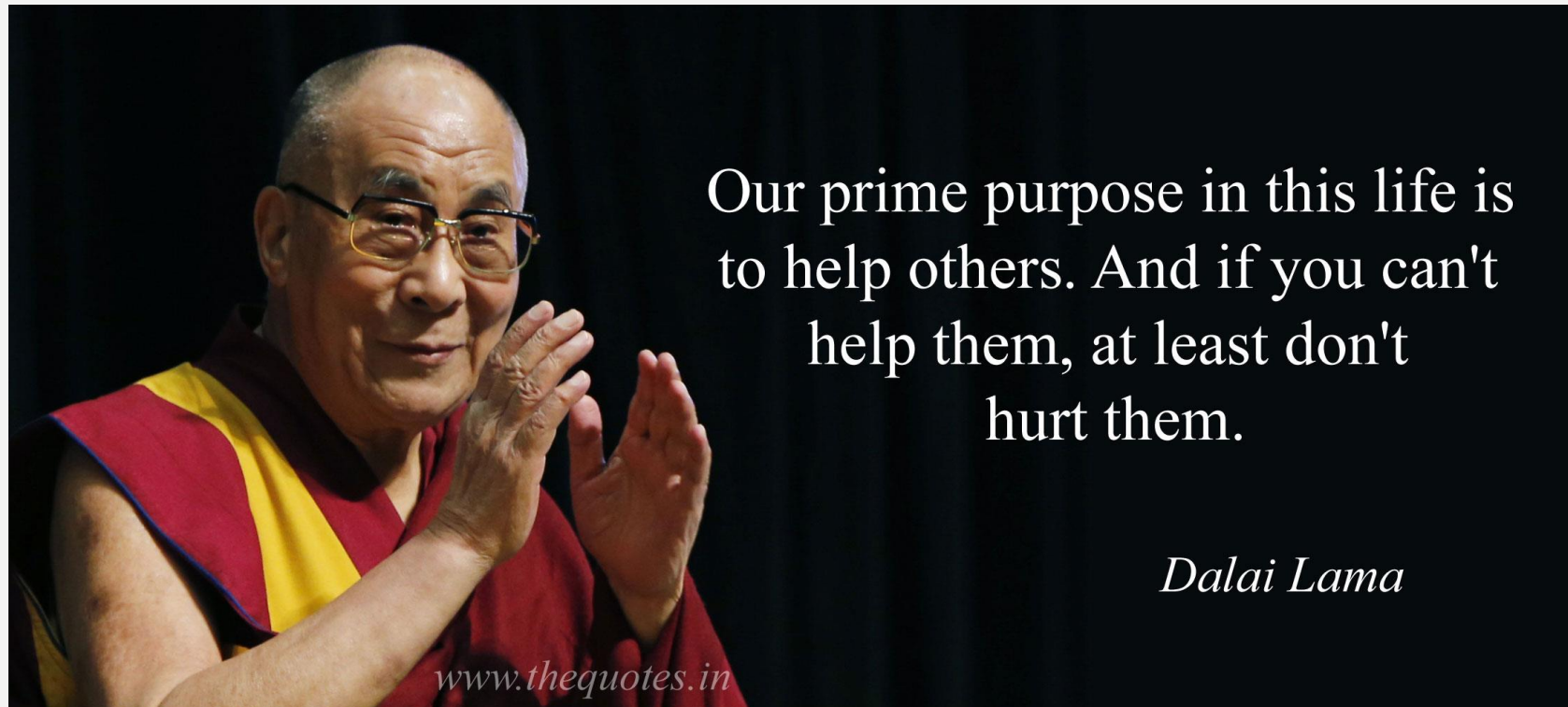
WHAT CAN WE DO , AS EDUCATORS, TO CREATE SAFETY IN THE CLASSROOM?

- Cultivate your Skills for Compassion
- Use Practices That Promote Safety
 - *Consistency, Predictability, Transparency*
 - *Create and Share Clear Expectations*
- Be Flexible but Maintain Limits
 - *It is not compassionate to reinforce behavioral patterns that cause short or long term harm to the student*
- Maintain Structure and Encourage Commitment
- Remain aware of Your Own Reactions to Your Students' Behaviors
- Universal Precautions

THANK YOU FOR ATTENDING!

QUESTIONS?

SWILSON2@PURDUEGLOBAL.EDU



REFERENCES

- Baum W.M. (1995). Radical Behaviorism and the concept of agency. *Behaviorology*. 1995; 3: 93–106.
- Cooper, J. O., Heron, T. E., & Heward, W. L. (2020). *Applied behavior analysis*. Merrill Publishing Co.
- Davidson, Shannon, and Education Northwest. Trauma-informed practices for Postsecondary education: A guide. *Education Northwest* (2017).
- Follette, V. M., Iverson, K. M., & Ford, J. D. (2009). Contextual behavior trauma therapy. *Treating complex traumatic stress disorders: An evidence-based guide*, 264-285.
- Gilbert, P. (2014). The origins and nature of compassion focused therapy. *British Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 53, 6–41. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/bjc.12043>
- Goetz, J. L., Keltner, D., & Simon-Thomas, E. (2010). Compassion: An evolutionary analysis and empirical review. *Psychological Bulletin*, 136, 351–374.
- Hoch, A., Stewart, D., Webb, K., & Wyandt-Hiebert, M. A. (2015). Trauma-informed care on a college campus. Presentation at the annual meeting of the American College Health Association, Orlando, FL.
- Huang, L. N., Flatow, R., Biggs, T., Afayee, S., Smith, K., Clark, T., & Blake, M. (2014). SAMHSA's concept of trauma and guidance for a trauma informed approach (SMA No. 14-4884). Retrieved from U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration website: <http://store.samhsa.gov/shin/content/SMA14-4884/SMA14-4884.pdf> Hyland-Russell, T., &
- Jazieri, H. (2018), "Compassionate education from preschool to graduate school: Bringing a culture of compassion into the classroom", *Journal of Research in Innovative Teaching & Learning*, Vol. 11 No. 1, pp. 22-66. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JRIT-08-2017-0017>

REFERENCES

- McFarland , S. & Bonavita, C. (2019).Autism and trauma :The_compatibility of_ABA and_trauma informed practices. Retrieved from: Autism_and_Trauma_The_Compatibility_of_ABA_and_Trauma_Informed_Practices_2019.pdf
- Michael J. Motivating Operations. In: Cooper JO, Heron TE, Heward WL, editors. *Applied behavior analysis*. . Upper Saddle River: Pearson; 2007. pp. 374–391.
- Racine N, Killam T, Madigan S. Trauma-Informed Care as a Universal Precaution: Beyond the Adverse Childhood Experiences Questionnaire. *JAMA Pediatr*. 2020;174(1):5–6. doi:10.1001/jamapediatrics.2019.3866
- SAMHSA (2014). SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach. Retrieved from <https://nicic.gov/samhsas-concept-trauma-and-guidance-trauma-informed-approach>
- Schmidt, N. B., Richey, J. A., Zvolensky, M. J., & Maner, J. K. (2008). Exploring human freeze responses to a threat stressor. *Journal of Behavior Therapy and Experimental Psychiatry*, 39(3), 292–304. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbtep.2007.08.002>
- Skinner, B.F. (1974). *About Behaviorism*. Vintage Books.
- Taylor, B.A., LeBlanc, L.A., & Nosik, M. R. (2018). Compassionate care in behavior analytic treatment: Can outcomes be enhanced by attending to relationships with caregivers?. *Behavior analysis in practice*, 12(3), 654–666. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40617-018-00289-3>