
Responding to the Complex Needs of Students: Helping Without Burning Out

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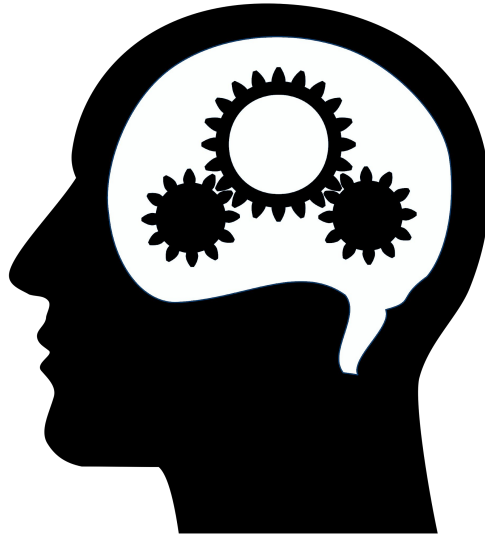
Erin Benner (she/her), LCSW is a Practicum Coordinator and Assistant Clinical Professor at UNE. Erin earned her MSW degree in 2009 and has since worked in home and community treatment settings with children and families, as a school-based clinician, as a community mental-health clinician, and also in private practice. Erin creates wellness and mental-health trainings for a Maine healthcare facility employee assistance program (EAP), and has also facilitated EAP workshops in the past. Erin is interested in the ways we foster social inclusion and belonging, and systems which value the strengths inherent in each person.

Objectives

- Students:
 - Identify and discuss the “4 R's of Trauma-Informed Care” when working with youth.
 - Review/ discuss how trauma impacts growth and development.
- You:
 - Address and normalize our own humanness/ what happens when caring for others.
 - Identify warning signs of burning out.
- The School Community:
 - Identify and discuss strategies for managing the day-to day challenges we face through a trauma-informed lens.
 - Apply trauma-informed principles to our own self-care and care for our colleagues.

Consider:

What resources (internal and external) do you have to support you in your work with students?



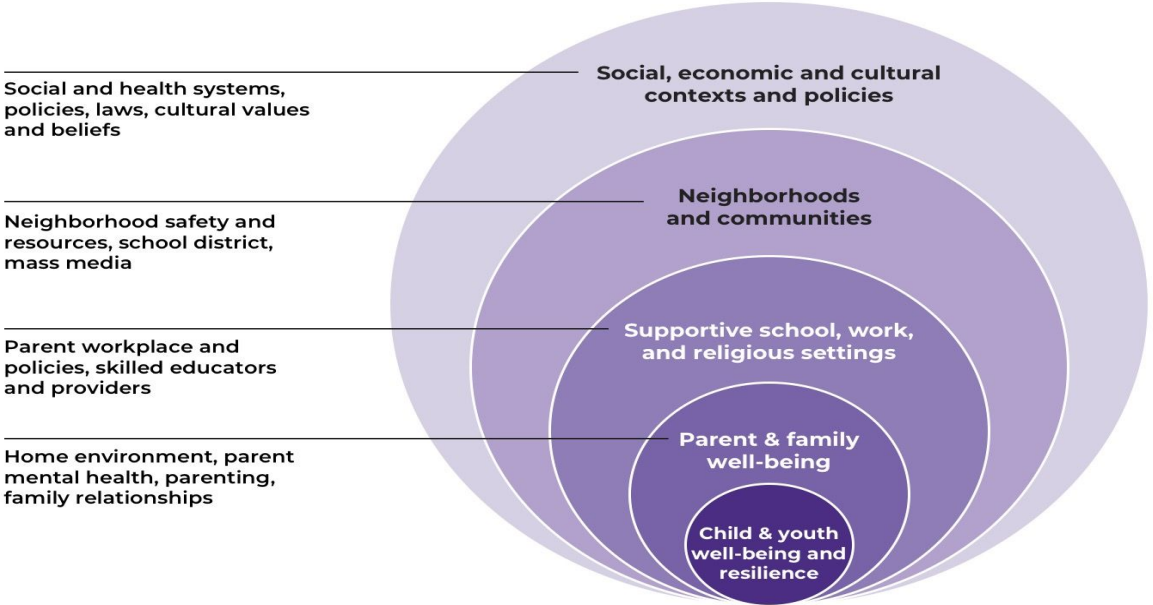
Complex Student Needs & Trauma-Informed Responses



4 R's of Trauma-Informed Care

- Realize
 - Understand how trauma impacts people
- Recognize
 - Signs, symptoms, common triggers
- Respond
 - Facilitate healing; active listening
- Resist
 - Re-traumatization

Realize: Bioecological Model of Development



Source: Center for Child and Family Well-Being, University of Washington (2020)

Realize: Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES)

<https://mainepublic.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/mht-aces-and-their-effects-video/student-mental-health-matters/>

Recognize: Effects of Trauma on Child Development

- Difficulty processing information
- Difficulty integrating new learning
- Impacts problem solving and decision making
- Impacts relational/ social skill development
- Impacts behavior; underdeveloped coping mechanisms
- Impacts how we see ourselves, others, and our world



Recognize:

Effects of Trauma on Child Development

- Overt Expression:
 - Anxiety, Aggression, Lack of emotion regulation, Withdrawal, Guarded, Defiance, etc.
- Covert Expression:
 - Stomach aches, Headaches, Sleep problems, Lack of interest in previously enjoyed activities, Dissociation, etc.

Respond:

- Knowledge of common triggers (i.e.: fighting, raised voices, loud noises, not knowing an answer, making a mistake, etc.).
- Teach grounding skills; practice them together regularly and normalize them
- Encourage resourcing (What qualities do you have that can help you? Who can help you? I see ___skill/ strength in you... etc.).
- Create plans ahead of time for communication, safety, and triage as needed.
- Follow-up with interprofessional team and caregivers.



Resist

Re-traumatization:

- Prioritize safety (physical and felt-sense), connection/ relationship, and regulation.
- Provide relational approach to consequences
- Understand what may be behind the behavior (What's the function? What need is trying to be met?)
- Acknowledge feelings, even when the behavior is inappropriate
- Offer alternatives and choice when possible; include extra time to process information; normalize

You Matter



We all have personal histories...

- ACES among helpers
 - Our emotional responses, based on our own personal histories, may be activated.
- Secondary/ Vicarious trauma when supporting others
- Great educators are helpful, caring, have concern for students...
 - ... these good qualities can also lead to overwhelm and/ or overidentifying with student's emotions (taking them on).

Managing Limited Environmental Resources

- Larger class sizes
- Staffing shortages
- Ambiguity in roles
- Financial hardship within the community
- Limited access to training
- Salary inequity



Burning Out

- Denotes emotional stress that those in helping professions may experience
- “People experiencing burnout may feel unappreciated, betrayed, exploited, blamed, or as though they no longer belong, in addition to feeling physically and emotionally depleted. Too often, burnout marks the end of [the] work...” (Hayes & Kaba, 2023).

Warning Signs

- Disengagement:
 - Lacking motivation to engage in ethical/responsible manner
 - Displacing all responsibility (“If it were up to me... but it’s not.”)
- Guilt
- Anxiety and/or depression
- Exhaustion
- Trouble concentrating
- Compassion fatigue
- Focusing on deficits of students, rather than strengths
- Loss of meaning/ purpose in the work
- Poor boundaries
- Loss of trust (in self and others)
- Change in worldview



Female Teacher, 27 years experience:

“Nobody talks about the emotional toll that it takes when you see these kids in these positions and knowing you can’t change it. It keeps you an arm’s length away from the emotions of the kids, which is ineffective teaching, or you just keep taking the dings to the point where you just can’t do it anymore. I think you lose a lot of good staff that way. I really do. So I think the training would be beneficial, but I think there has to be follow-up. You just can’t throw (us) textbook stuff and expect us to absorb it and not give us keys on how to handle the day to day.” (Dubois & Mistretta, 2019).

Handling the Day to Day: Strategies for Self-Care, Supervision, & Community Care



Breakout Group:

Trauma-Informed Self-Care- 4 Quadrant Model

Before: Routines for emotional and physical wellness, transitional activities, awareness of our own stressors/ triggers

During: Strategies for staying present and grounded (breathing, mantras, boundary visualization), take a break if needed.

After: Movement/ exercise, utilize professional and social supports, low-impact debriefing, transitional activities away from work

Ongoing: Develop and engage in outside interests, breathing exercises, relaxation strategies, movement, stay connected to others

Dubois, A. L., & Mistretta, M. A. (2019). *Overcoming Burnout and Compassion Fatigue in Schools : A Guide for Counselors, Administrators, and Educators* (1st ed.). Taylor & Francis Group.

Boundaries: A Self-Care Practice

- Clarity on working hours vs. non-working hours
- Pausing before agreeing to take on additional work (Do I really have the bandwidth/ ability to do this?)
- Separation between your emotions and other's (emotional boundaries) while maintaining compassion
- Avoiding “savior mentality” (i.e.: “Only I can help,” “I have to take on more,” etc.).



Quality Supervision and Leadership

- Involved vs. Detached
 - Involved administrators know what is happening with students and families, listen to staff, and provide help when needed
 - Detached:

“I don’t have that support from our main administrator. I don’t know if it’s because we have been there so long that she almost feels like we can run it ourselves. And there are times when we really do need that person to help us and we don’t get the help... [When handling a child abuse issue] our administrator really wasn’t involved. Asked a few questions once in a while, but nothing too much.” (Dubois & Mistretta, 2019).
- Educators and school counselors consistently emphasize how important quality supervision and administrative support is:
 - Reinforces competence and resilience
 - Supports debriefing and processing difficult situations
 - Provides constructive feedback, emotional support, and validation

Support from Colleagues

- Lower levels of stress and emotional activation are reported when staff have supportive colleagues who work with them and alongside them in teams (paraprofessionals, teachers, support workers, counselors, social workers, etc.). (Dubois & Mistretta, 2019).
 - More social connectedness
 - Greater sense of belonging and job satisfaction
 - Ability to debrief directly following a challenging situation



Community Care as Self-Care

“I think the best way to do collaborative and collective care is to ask, How are we backing each other up? How are we encouraging each other to take the breaks we need, but not making ourselves make impossible choices? How do we make sure the goals of our work are covered so that nobody has to burn themselves out... How do we create more of our work in teams?” (Ejeris Dixon, New York based activist/ organizer as quoted in Hayes & Kaba, 2023).

Community Care as Self-Care

As a school community, create opportunities for recognition of staff, their efforts, and their strengths

- Rewards don't *have* to be monetary (though, that's nice too!)

As much as possible, create consistent and predictable work assignments, schedules, and responsibilities

Work together to create an “all on the same team” approach, rather than promoting competitiveness or “expert mindset” within interprofessional teams



Debriefing Strategies: Constructive vs. Destructive

- We can often *feel* when a conversation is becoming harmful rather than helpful, but it can still be difficult to resist engaging in some of these behaviors:
 - Emotional dumping, cynicism, helplessness, gossip, detailed retelling of traumatic experiences, “one-upping.”
- Constructive debriefing stays focused on the resiliency of the staff member, creates a plan for the student moving forward, and proactively prevents future burnout

Low-Impact Debriefing (Mathieu, 2012)

- Details/ graphics kept minimal
- Emphasizes response to student
- Emphasizes minimizing residual harm to the staff
- Asks for consent first before sharing
(i.e.: “Do you have time to talk?”)



It may also be helpful to first decide (and then communicate), what you are looking for from the other person- (i.e.: “I need help with a solution to this problem,” or “I need to be reminded that I’m a good educator/ counselor/ social worker.”)

Compassion Satisfaction

- Vicarious Resilience
- Honoring and celebrating victories with students

What resources (internal/ external) do you have that can support you in your work with students? (Compared to beginning of the workshop).



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