

Leveraging the Neuroscience of Now

Mays Imad explores seven ways professors can help students thrive in class in times of trauma.

[Mays Imad](#), June 3, 2020



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One of my students who recently lost her job and is fearful for her health and well-being, having recently been exposed to someone who tested positive for COVID-19, asked me, “How do you have the will to get out of bed?” Wanting to honor the gravity of the question, I paused. In fact, I was startled by her question and my inability to give her a calming answer.

I said to her, “That’s a great question. Some days, it’s harder than others.” But I reminded my student of what the Persian poet Rumi says: “Friends, we are traveling together.”

This feeling of world-weariness that my student expressed is not uncommon. The social isolation and loneliness of the COVID-19 pandemic present significant [emotional](#) and [physical](#) health risks that make us feel disconnected and put us on high alert, triggering the body's stress response.

How can we not be feeling stress and anxiety? Our brains do an amazing job of keeping us alive -- constantly scanning the environment, looking for and responding to threats and dangers. In the midst of a pandemic, our brains are grappling with at least two overarching issues.

First, because we are social beings, our brains view social isolation as a threat -- in fact, prolonged social isolation negatively impacts our physical and mental health. Worse, we have become almost reflexively afraid of each other because the person standing close to us at the store is a potential source of infection.

Second, because we are not quite equipped to handle ambiguity, our brains are interpreting unanswered questions as a source of danger. Put simply, we are scared -- of the loneliness, of the pain of loss we see around us and may feel, and of the unpredictability of the future. We are trying to make sense of existential threats brought on by a pandemic. It is no wonder that most of us, along with our students, are experiencing stress, anxiety and even trauma.

When I say trauma, I am using the [Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration](#) (SAMHSA) definition of trauma: “an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual’s functioning and physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.”

The origin of trauma does not have to be violent or abusive, because trauma is centered in an individual experience and can have conscious and unconscious manifestations. Two students may be exposed to the same events but experience those events in vastly different ways,

where one student's reality is traumatic while the other's is not.

There are concrete grounds for today's students to be on the verge of mental health crises. As I write this article, we are confronted with a bleak reality of over 100,000 deaths, millions of job losses and feelings of social and physical vulnerability. This pandemic is also [exacerbating long-standing inequities](#), which will likely compound the trauma and even retrigger past emotions experienced by students who have been and continue to be marginalized in and by society.

Even before the pandemic, a [2018 World Health Organization global survey](#) of 14,000 students found that one in three college freshmen reported dealing with mental illness in the years leading to college. In the same year, in a survey by the [American College Health Association](#) of 48,000 college students, participants reported that anxiety and depression are among the biggest factors that negatively affect their academic performance. Sixty-seven percent of women and 54 percent of men had felt "very lonely." Over all, 42 percent of students said they had felt so depressed in the past year that they could not function. Those statistics are compounded by the reality of COVID-19. While trauma is an individual experience, an ongoing global pandemic is traumatic for most, if not all of us.

As educators, we need to consider the questions: What does this pandemic reality mean for students' ability to learn? How can we teach to the lonely, the anxious and the fearful?

When the brain is under traumatic stress, it goes into survival mode by prioritizing what matters - - conserving energy to stay alive. The work of [Bessel Van der Kolk](#), [Antonio Damasio](#) and others helps us understand that when we experience trauma, whether consciously or subconsciously, the limbic system (emotions) hijacks the cerebral cortex (reason). Learning, which requires the expenditure of energy, becomes *physiologically* less of a priority to our

brain -- making it difficult to learn about, for example, linear regressions or the cell cycle.

In this midst of a pandemic, is it feasible to expect that our students can learn?

They can continue to learn -- brilliantly so -- but *only if* we change the ways we understand learning and radically reconceive how we teach. As educators, we must have at least some rudimentary understanding of how to recognize and mitigate stress, anxiety and trauma. More specifically, moving forward, we must adopt a trauma-informed approach to teaching and students' learning.

Recognizing Trauma

Trauma-informed pedagogy requires having a keen awareness of our students' past and present experiences and the effects of those experiences on students' well-being. I am not calling for us to become mental health experts or therapists. Instead, if we want our students to learn, we must recognize trauma in ourselves and our students and, at the very least, ensure that we help our students feel safe, empowered and connected.

A trauma-informed pedagogy enables us to recognize that amid a pandemic, our students may have a difficult time completing basic tasks they normally would, including keeping track of the slightest changes in our classes, making decisions about their learning, being motivated to study or to show up, prioritizing assignments, engaging with classmates or the subject, managing their time, or simply not quitting.

To intentionally alleviate the negative impact this pandemic is having on our students' learning, I offer seven principles and suggestions to help guide our teaching practices. Some of suggestions are based, in part, on SAMHSA's [key principles](#) of trauma-informed practices. Each of the following can guide our work as we help our students learn.

No. 1: Work to ensure your students' emotional, cognitive, physical and

interpersonal safety. When we don't feel safe, learning becomes difficult because, as I've mentioned, the brain prioritizes staying alive over learning. How can we help our students feel safe? Begin by asking yourself what makes you feel safe when you are most vulnerable, have lost a sense of agency and are facing uncertainty. One way we can help others feel safe is by revealing our own vulnerability. Model storytelling by sharing how you are handling the current situation and establishing or re-establishing meaningful connections.

Don't stop there. Ask your students how they are doing, what safety means to them and how you can help them feel safe in your course. Consider keeping an online journal to document how you are going through the quarantine and how you handle anxiety when it comes up. Invite your students to keep a diary as an outlet to express how they feel. If they feel comfortable sharing what they've written with your class, offer that space.

No. 2: Foster trustworthiness and transparency through connection and communication among students. A focus on creating and maintaining trust can mitigate the adverse effects of uncertainty and help students find meaning and connections in your class. That means articulating how each assignment relates to the objectives of the course, as well as spelling out the steps required to complete each assignment and how it will be evaluated. Foster trust by being clear, transparent and reliable. For more information, see [Transparency in Learning and Teaching](#).

No. 3: Intentionally facilitate peer support and mutual self-help in your courses. Facilitate relationship building among your students by encouraging them to check up on each other if they are comfortable doing so. Invite your students to share their own stories and strategies to help each other cope and progress academically. In person or, especially in our virtual classrooms, and amid ongoing trauma

caused by the pandemic, emphasizing peer support is an integral way to foster community. Remind your students that the connections we make with others not only help them but ourselves, as well.

No. 4: Promote collaboration and mutuality by sharing power and decision making with your students. Ask your students what matters to them now, what they want to learn and what interests them. Take notes and incorporate their ideas into your communications and instructions. In [Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope](#), bell hooks argues for us to “make the classroom a place that is life-sustaining and mind-expanding, a place of liberating mutuality where teacher and student together work in partnership.” Invite conversation and guidance from students. Create a setting conducive to collaboration and the sharing of power between students and instructors by, for example, asking them for their opinions or inviting them to co-create assignments.

No. 5: Empower voice and choice by identifying and helping build on student strengths. Validate and normalize their concerns by talking with your students about fear, stress, anxiety and trauma. Like us, our students' lives have suddenly been turned upside down, and many of them have lost a sense of control or agency. After watching my recent webinar on [how to mitigate stress and anxiety](#), students reached out to me to thank me for helping them understand that the feelings they were experiencing, such as a lack of motivation and energy, were driven by their physiology and that binge-watching Netflix was not indicative that they are lazy or don't care about college.

Empower those who have lost a sense of control or agency to have a voice and to advocate for themselves. For example, create a short survey and ask your students, “How can I help you learn during these difficult times?”

No. 6: Pay attention to cultural, historical and gender issues. Understand and use an

[intersectional](#) lens when considering the challenges your students are facing. First, when we treat our students as if they are all the same, we overlook differences that are integral to their identities -- inadvertently erasing some of their singularity. As educators, we want not only to understand this reality but also to ensure that we don't inadvertently stress or even retraumatize our students.

Second, consider how racialized communities may experience trauma more severely due [the impact](#) of [intergenerational traumas](#) and *ongoing* oppression and marginalization. As educators, we want to not only understand this reality but also ensure that we don't inadvertently stress or further traumatize our students.

Third, commit to learning about and [responding to microaggressions in online environments](#). Microaggressions are a source of daily traumatic stress for many of our students as well as our colleagues. In his book [Microaggressions in Everyday Life](#), Derald Wing Sue reminds us, "Microaggressions have been found to affect the biological, emotional, cognitive and behavioral well-being of marginalized groups." Living through a pandemic, without having to experience an abrupt transition to online learning, is traumatic enough.

Fourth, work toward understanding your own default framework and biases related to your discipline. Learn about knowledge and practices that have been disregarded or excluded historically in your discipline and consider supplementing instead.

Fifth, commit to learning about and implementing accessible, equitable and [antiracist](#) teaching and learning strategies. Consider an [assessment](#) framework that is less focused on grading and more focused on improving learning or that celebrates students' [creativity](#).

No. 7: Impart to your students the importance of having a sense of purpose. Intentionally convey to your students your passion for teaching

and why you continue to teach. Invite them to identify or reconnect with their sense of purpose and why that is important to inform and reaffirm their existence. The Chilean poet Pablo Neruda reminds us that "All paths lead to the same goal: to convey to others what we are. And we must pass through solitude and difficulty, isolation and silence in order to reach forth to the enchanted place where we can dance our clumsy dance and sing our sorrowful song -- but in this dance or in this song there are fulfilled the most ancient rites of our conscience in the awareness of being human and of believing in a common destiny."

All of these principles are about our students being seen, feeling part of a community and contributing to the world inside and outside our classroom.

Our roles as teachers and leaders are more important than ever. In his book [Radical Hope](#), Kevin Gannon reminds us, "Teaching is a radical act of hope. It is an assertion of faith in a better future in an increasingly uncertain and fraught present. It is a commitment to that future even if we can't clearly discern its shape."

Hope can be a passive gesture: "let's hope it all turns out OK." But hope can also be active, as a resistive act of defiance, self-empowerment and enduring resilience even in the face of uncertainty. [We impart hope](#) -- cultivating our students' and our ability to continue learning, to connect, to love and to dream -- of a better future for us and our fellow human beings.

Returning to Rumi's poem, when my student and I discussed the meaning of "Friends, we are traveling together," I let her know that since COVID-19 emerged, I, too, have had days where I find it difficult to get out of bed and go to work when my mind continues to nag, "What does all this mean?" We also enacted our connection, closeness and feelings of "being with" each other. After all, it is the enduring beauty of our interconnectedness as fellow travelers that will allow us to continue to learn in spite of tumultuous times.

As teachers, we don't simply impart information. We need to cultivate spaces where students are empowered co-create meaning, purpose and knowledge -- what I have termed a "learning sanctuary." In such a sanctuary, the path to learning is cloaked with radical hospitality and paved with hope and moral imagination. And it is our connections, the community of the

classroom and our sense of purpose that will illuminate that path.

These recommendations are not exhaustive. Learn more about [trauma-informed pedagogy](#) and share additional suggestions at [#traumainformedhighered](#) and [#lrningsanctuary](#).

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