“Ours is Not a Caravan of Despair”: Trauma-Informed Education in Turbulent Times

Mays Imad, PhD

mimad@pima.edu

https://twitter.com/lrningsanctuary
Today, we will:

1. Examine the neuroscience of toxic or traumatic stress and its impact on learning.
2. Learn about the principles and practical examples of trauma-informed approaches.
3. Reflect on the connections between trauma-informed teaching and restorative justice.

Mays Imad, Ph.D.  mimad@pima.edu  @lrningsanctuary
It’s All about the Brain!

The key to defining any experience, including learning, lies in the nervous system—not in the event itself.

Mays Imad, Ph.D.  mimad@pima.edu  @lrningsanctuary
We Feel, Then We Assign Meaning, Then We Act

Feeling and Thinking

“We are not thinking machines that feel; rather, we are feeling machines that think.”
We Feel, Therefore We Learn: The Relevance of Affective and Social Neuroscience to Education

Mays Imad, Ph.D.
mimad@pima.edu
@lrningsanctuary

Emotions are a Gateway to Learning

Orbit of Challenges to Our Emotional Wellbeing

Mays Imad, Ph.D. mimad@pima.edu @lrningsanctuary
38K+ students told us that...

NEARLY 3 IN 5 were experiencing basic needs insecurity

FOOD INSECURITY AFFECTED
44% at two-year institutions
38% at four-year institutions

15% & 11% at two-year institutions were experiencing HOMELESSNESS due to the pandemic

THE BLACK/WHITE GAP in basic needs insecurity was 19 percentage points

The Hope Center
For College, Community, and Justice
HOPE4COLLEGE.COM
Our students were struggling BEFORE March 2020

Mays Imad, Ph.D.  mimad@pima.edu  @lrningsanctuary

https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/about.html
It’s not typical stress.
It’s traumatic stress.
What is Trauma?

“Any negative life event that occurs in a position of relative helplessness.”

Mays Imad, Ph.D. mimad@pima.edu @lrningsanctuary

What is Trauma?

“It’s about being frightened or overwhelmed beyond our capacity to rebound.”

Mays Imad, Ph.D. mimad@pima.edu @lrningsanctuary
Important to Note

1. Trauma is centered in the individual experience of an event (not the event itself).
2. Trauma can have conscious or unconscious manifestations.
3. Origin of trauma does not have to be violent or abusive.

Mays Imad, Ph.D. mimad@pima.edu @lrningsanctuary

Staying Alive

Our instinct to survive plays a critical role in how we interpret sensory information, assign meaning, & act.

Mays Imad, Ph.D. mimad@pima.edu @lrningsanctuary
When we interpret something as threatening or harmful, we experience traumatic stress in our body and our brain.

- **Fight or Flight response**
  - State of high alert
  - Action, not thought
  - Inability to think clearly
  - Extreme thoughts
  - Hypervigilance
  - Attention to threat
  - Intense and prolonged anxiety
  - Drive to take action
Being Stuck in ‘Fight or Flight’ Challenges Our Biological Resilience

Mays Imad, Ph.D. | mimad@pima.edu | @lrningsanctuary
The Brain Prioritizes Survival Over Learning
“Amygdala Hijack”

Hyperactive amygdala within the limbic system →
Stress Hormones →
Fight or Flight or Freeze Response →
Impairs Our Ability to Pay Attention, 
Make Decisions, Learn, & Remember

Mays Imad, Ph.D. | mimad@pima.edu | @lrningsanctuary

Fight - Flight - Freeze
What’s really happening when we go into...
"SURVIVAL MODE"

Learning/Thinking Brain (Prefrontal Cortex)
The logical, smart part of your brain goes "off-line"

Limbic System
Lower brain functions "take over!"
Is Learning Possible In These Disruptive Times?

Yes, but we need an intervention.

Calming the Nervous System
Trauma-Informed Care

Trauma-Informed Pedagogy requires having a keen awareness of the prevalence and impact of trauma; that our students’ past and present experiences affect their ability to learn and their well-being. We must be able to recognize trauma in ourselves and our students. We respond by being intentional to promote safe environments that cultivate connectedness, empowerment, and healing.

Mays Imad, Ph.D.  mimad@pima.edu  @lrningsanctuary
Trauma-Informed Pedagogy **MISCONCEPTIONS:**

- **M#1:** Trauma-informed pedagogy requires that we have training in social work or clinical psychology.

- **M#2:** There are no rules and students can “get away” with anything.

- **M#3:** Trauma-informed pedagogy means having lower academic expectations.

- **M#4:** Trauma-informed pedagogy is a model only for high-poverty schools.

- **M#5:** Trauma-informed pedagogy is just for students who have experienced trauma.

Mays Imad, Ph.D. | mimad@pima.edu | @lrningsanctuary

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**Recognize that students may have a hard time:**

1. Keeping track of changes in your class.
2. Managing their time.
4. Being motivated to study.
5. Prioritizing assignments.
6. Engaging with classmates or subject.
7. Expressing themselves.
8. Having the confidence to learn.
10. Finding a sense of purpose in your class.

Mays Imad, Ph.D. | mimad@pima.edu | @lrningsanctuary

https://collegeinfogeek.com/brain-fog/
There are two preconditions for every human being to meaningfully engage, learn, and thrive in life: feeling safe and feeling connected.
We can foster a sense of safety by:

1. reducing uncertainty;

2. leveraging communication.
We can build connections by:

1. cultivating community;
2. identifying meaning.

Mays Imad, Ph.D.  mimad@pima.edu  @lrningsanctuary
Beyond Safety & Connections

Impart Hope

The Neuroscience of Hope
When we experience the feeling of hope, our brains release the neurochemical **endorphins** which mimics the effects of morphine. The result is that the brain can overcome hurdles and move to a place of **healing** and **recovery**.

**Hope = To wish for something better with expectation of its fulfillment.**
Our brains make sense of the world by acting like a sophisticated statistical program to make predictions about the future.

“I live a hope despite my knowing better”

“... despite my knowing better” suggests that there are reasons *against* hope
“I live a hope despite my knowing better”

Predictions depend on information we currently have, history, memory, and what matters to us.
How Do We Reignite Our Relationship with Hope?

1. Feel the discontent; allow pain to guide our understanding.
2. Wonder about other, better possibilities.
3. Foster a moral imagination with specific goals.
4. Center the collective.
5. Focus on the steps and the process to achieve small tidbits.
6. Do the work.
“Hope does not arise from being told to ‘think positively,’ or from hearing an overly rosy forecast. Hope, unlike optimism, is rooted in unalloyed reality. **Hope is the elevating feeling we experience when we see—in the mind’s eye—a path to a better future.** Hope acknowledges the significant obstacles and deep pitfalls along the path.”

—*The Anatomy of Hope* (2004) by Jerry Groopman, MD
1. Feel the discontent; allow pain to guide our understanding.
2. Wonder about other possibilities.
3. Foster a moral imagination with specific goals.
4. Center the collective.
5. Focus on the steps and the process to achieve small tidbits.
6. Do the work.
7. **Have an anchor.**

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Come, come, whoever you are.

Wonderer, worshipper, lover of leaving.

It doesn’t matter.

Ours is not a caravan of despair.

Come, even if you have broken your vow a thousand times

Come, yet again, come, come.

- Rumi