



September 25, 2023

Trauma and the College Classroom

Teaching with a trauma-informed lens.

By [Steven Mintz](#)

Trauma surrounds us. Perhaps you recall the abduction in April 2014 of 276 schoolgirls from a government secondary school in Chibok, Nigeria. Or Russia's mass abduction of Ukrainian children. Or the still-continuing practice of separating some child migrants from their parents at the U.S.-Mexico border.

Those are some of the most extreme examples of trauma. But trauma takes many forms: school shootings, sexual assaults, physical and emotional abuse, bullying, horrific accidents, and witnessing the death of a loved one.

It's not a coincidence that one of the most popular nonfiction books in recent memory—Bessel van der Kolk's 2014 book, *The Body Keeps the Score*—spent 245 weeks on *The New York Times* best-seller list, including 27 weeks at No. 1. It's No. 15 on Amazon's list of best sellers today.

Yet the concept of trauma elicits a lot of ambivalence. Is the term bandied about too promiscuously, confusing ordinary human distress with emotional trauma? Is the language of trauma, with its connotations of harm and violence and helplessness, wielded as a weapon or an instrument of power, control or manipulation? Does the notion of trauma downplay people's capacity for agency, coping and resilience? Is it true, as van der Kolk and Judith L. Herman have argued, that trauma literally reshapes both body and brain, compromising sufferers' capacities for pleasure, engagement, self-control and trust?

Concern about the impact of psychological trauma is not new. As Ruth Leys showed in her classic 2000 volume, *Trauma: A Genealogy*, shell shock during World War I, the Holocaust, traumatic neuroses suffered by World War II veterans and post-traumatic stress disorder following the Vietnam War triggered profound debates about psychological trauma's causes, manifestations, etiology and treatment protocols.

At various times, hypnosis, talk therapy and psychopharmacology have been proposed as possible palliatives. During the 1920s, "reliving the trauma" was often recommended as a form of catharsis. The 1970s and 1980s witnessed, at first, a belief that repressed memories of traumatic abuse could be recovered, followed by charges that well-meaning but misguided therapists and prosecutors implanted false memories in children and adults. More recently, van der Kolk has argued that neurofeedback, meditation, sports, dance, drama and yoga can activate the brain's natural plasticity and place trauma survivors on the road to recovery.

Even today, however, our understanding of trauma remains partial and unsatisfactory. There are deep disagreements about whether a traumatic event imprints itself in a person's psyche or whether it's a person's perceptions and, perhaps, certain personality vulnerabilities, that makes an experience traumatic.

There's also disagreement about what should be included under the rubric of psychological trauma. Should this be confined to the most extreme events—rape, childhood neglect, domestic abuse, violent crime, natural disaster, war and displacement—or should the concept be applied somewhat broadly, to encompass "transgenerational trauma," "inherited family trauma," "racialized trauma," "vicarious" or "secondary trauma," "curricular trauma," "developmental trauma," "relational trauma," and the "trauma of birth"?

Then there's a debate surrounding the increasing prevalence of the language of trauma. Has the semantic expansion of the language of trauma, harm and injury contributed to the view that individual psyches are fragile, easily broken, subject to triggering and in need of professional help and intervention?

Some writers, like the Canadian psychologist Tana Dineen, the author of *Manufacturing Victims* (and herself a critic of overtreatment through psychopharmaceuticals), argue that an overemphasis on human frailty has resulted in a tendency to make victimhood a prominent feature in many people's identity, producing a debilitating focus on grievances and injustices.

It's not surprising that the growing emphasis on trauma has produced a backlash. Nick Haslam, who has written widely on semantic creep in the language of harm, [asserts](#) that "when we start to talk about ordinary adversities as 'traumas' there is a risk that we'll see them as harder to overcome and see ourselves as more damaged by them."

In an essay critical of the on the pervasiveness of the "trauma plot" in fiction and film, the literary critic and *New Yorker* staff writer Parul Sehgal [expressed concern](#) that "Trauma trumps all other identities, evacuates personality, remakes it in its own image." Will Self, writing in *Harper's*, [argued](#) that modern trauma theory is a secularized version of the Judeo-Christian eschatology of redemption:

"For literary theorists, psychic trauma is an exclusive sort of stigmata, a wound at once invisible and sacred, the bearers of which become sanctified and thereby able to convey the singular Truth that shines through the miasma of contemporary moral relativism: that of their own suffering."

What is clear is that psychological trauma can overwhelm individuals' psychic defenses and undercut their capacity for attachment and trust. In its most extreme manifestations, psychological trauma can result in dissociation, splitting, acting out, self-harm or the perpetuation of cycles of abuse, and in somewhat less extreme cases, it can produce anxiety, rage, self-medication and an inability to concentrate or focus.

In my area of research, the academic study of childhood, there can be no doubt that the psychological concept of trauma has become a key lens for analysis and interpretation. An earlier emphasis on children's agency has increasingly given way to a focus on trauma, evident, for example, in discussions of "soul murder" under slavery.

The heightened awareness of trauma is not surprising, given what young people have gone through in recent years.

Today's children have been buffeted by a series of trauma-like events. These include the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression of the 1930s, a global pandemic that left a million Americans dead, intensifying political polarization and a long-overdue reckoning with race, police violence, entrenched inequalities and persistent poverty. We are beginning to see among the immediate consequences the worst learning losses in 30 years; a mental health crisis as reported rates of anxiety, depression and loneliness soared among adolescents; and extreme negativity about the future.

In the pandemic's wake, many children exhibit trauma-like symptoms. Teachers continue to report that many American schoolchildren remain intensely anxious, depressed and persistently sad. Among the behavioral red flags that they see are signs of withdrawal, stress, pent-up rage and high levels of distractibility.

What does the heightened awareness of trauma mean for those of us who teach? We must recognize that:

1. **Trauma is not a subject to ever treat lightly.** It is absolutely essential to be sensitive and empathetic. Recognize that some behaviors might be manifestations of trauma. Create a safe and supportive learning environment where students feel respected. Be careful about inadvertently retraumatizing or triggering past trauma. Acknowledge a student's feelings and point of view. Consider asking the student to clarify what she or he finds triggering or harmful about the content. Open a dialogue.

But balance awareness of trauma and its impact with an emphasis on human agency, self-efficacy and resilience and on the ability of individuals to cope with even extreme threats to their psychological well-being, harness their inner strengths and even grow from their experiences. Remember: your goal is to foster learning and growth.

2. **Cultural definitions of and responses to trauma vary radically.** Responses to and expressions of psychological trauma vary significantly depending on a host of factors, not just an individual's personal history, coping mechanisms and support structures, but on culture and societal expectations. An important anthology, *Trauma and Dissociation in a Cross-Cultural Perspective*, edited by George F. Rhoades Jr. and Vedat Sar, reveals the very different ways that people in various cultures deal with physical and mental distress.

3. **Subjective representations of trauma are increasingly accessible.** Personal letters, diaries, memoirs, novels and poems are only a few of the sources that instructors might use to explore the ways that traumatic events have been experienced and processed. A 2021 collection of essays, *Languages of Trauma: History, Memory and Media*, edited by Peter Leese, Jason Crouthamel and Julia Barbara Köhne, includes analyses of the private writings by British and Irish nurses during the First World War about the severely wounded men that they sought to help; the use religious language by German soldiers in coping with traumatic battlefield experiences

during the Great War; the symptoms associated with wartime trauma among Finnish soldiers in World War II, including sensory and motor dysfunctions, somatic responses, various inexplicable palpitations, most of all epilepsy-like seizures; and the misrepresentation of sexual violence in war films.

4. **Fostering a growth mind-set.** Don't confuse your role as an instructor with that of a professional therapist, counselor or social worker, but do share stories of individuals who have faced terrible adversities and traumas and have demonstrated resilience and growth. In the [words](#) of Fredrik deBoer,

"Given that pain and suffering are literally and permanently unavoidable in human life, teaching others to be resilient rather than teaching them to be victims is an act of mercy and cultivating resilience in yourself is an act of essential personal growth and adult development."

A particularly fraught topic is historical, transgenerational and Intergenerational trauma. There is little doubt that the legacy of trauma can be transmitted from one generation to the next. But how this occurs and its impact and expression are subject to debate.

Historical trauma refers to events such as war, genocide, mass displacement, enslavement and colonization that leave a lasting legacy that is not exclusively economic or demographic, but psychological as well.

Transgenerational trauma is encoded within a family system and can influence childrearing. The classic cases involve Holocaust survivors or combat veterans who do not talk about their experiences, but whose children grow up sensing a parent's pain and suffering. Intergenerational trauma typically refers to the ways that trauma affects behavior and beliefs, resulting, for example, in cross-generational abuse or unresolved grief or anger or the transmission of stories and memories.

You might consider drawing upon historical case studies. Wolfgang Schivelbusch's 2003 tour de force, *The Culture of Defeat: On National Trauma, Mourning and Recovery*, might serve as an example. The author examines how a number of history's losers, including the Confederate states, France after the Franco-Prussian War and Germany following World War I, responded to military defeat. The book examines the strategies that prewar elites used to retain power, the myths that these vanquished societies generated to rationalize defeat and bellicose fantasies of retaliation, retribution and revenge.

While a college professor's primary role is to teach academic content, the classroom can also be a space where students learn life skills, including a growth mind-set, resilience and coping skills. To that end, consider adding an interdisciplinary course on trauma to the curriculum.

Such a course might begin by introducing students to various kinds of trauma and to the development, across history, of various cultural understandings of trauma. Thus, it would be important to introduce students to acute, chronic, complex and developmental trauma and to how the concept of trauma has evolved over time and the debates trauma has engendered.

This course might, then, look at varying sources of trauma, as well as trauma's neurobiology, including fight, flight, freeze and appease responses; the impact of trauma on the nervous system; neuroplasticity and trauma; and symptoms related to psychological trauma, such as post-traumatic stress disorder and dissociative and attachment disorders. One might also look at trauma's impact on attachment, biology, affect regulation, consciousness, cognition, behavior and self-concept.

Next, such a class might offer cultural perspectives on trauma, resilience and healing. This might include asking how societies in the past and in diverse cultural settings have responded to traumatic experiences and examining the concept of transgenerational and intergenerational trauma. Then the course might turn to treatment modalities, including cognitive behavior therapy, body-based therapies and psychopharmacological treatment.

It is essential, in my view, that the study of trauma include first-person and literary accounts, above all, narratives that look at resilience and post-trauma personal growth. Among the most compelling works of fiction that deal with trauma, healing and growth are Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*.

Let me conclude with some reflections on the notion of the academy as an ivory tower. The term was apparently first introduced in 1837 by the French critic Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve to contrast the overly academic and abstract from life's essential realities and facts. The disconnection between the academy from everyday life is not a bad thing. It's what allows faculty and students to reflect freely and critically upon the outside world. If we are to protect higher ed's independence, we should be wary of shedding its ivory tower image. But that doesn't mean that we shouldn't engage with real-world issues.

Trauma is at the forefront of public consciousness. Contributing to public awareness are a never-ending train of horrific events, including war and mass shootings; the efforts of advocacy and activist groups, like Black Lives Matter and Me Too and proponents of refugee and Indigenous peoples' rights that highlight collective traumas and call for redress; and the frequent representations of traumatic events and their aftermath in novels, films and television shows.

So, please, don't shy away from confronting trauma within the classroom as well as in our research.

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