



Trauma-Informed Education

A Pathway for Relief, Retention, and Renewal

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Abstract

The principles of trauma-informed education can improve outcomes for students and educators alike, leading to improved retention as well as well-being. Understanding trauma, how to identify it, and how to curate a classroom environment to address its impact means that not only do higher education providers create a more empathetic business, but also that students can bring their own trauma-informed skills into the workforce to improve their work-life balance and the industries they serve.

Executive Summary

Students of all experiences and background—including the working adult population University of Phoenix serves—may come to their educational journey from experiences of trauma and stress that impact their education and career journeys. Modern educational models need to adapt to continue to provide learners with the opportunity to make the most of their educational investment.

Trauma-informed methodologies have emerged as a way of addressing this, including trauma-informed education. Trauma-informed education provides students with the sense of safety and support that empowers them to pursue their goals for education and careers. At University of Phoenix, educators are encouraged to implement trauma-informed education in their classrooms—reflective of an institutional commitment to support students. Implementing trauma-informed education lays the foundation for better student

outcomes, improved retention, and a more compassionate educational and working environment.

A Traumatic World

In 2017, the World Health Organization Mental Health Survey Initiative revealed that 70 percent of adults have had at least one experience of trauma, including witnessing a death or serious injury; experiencing the unexpected death of a loved one; being mugged; being in a life-threatening automobile accident; or experiencing a life-threatening illness or injury (Kesler et al)—and in a post-COVID world, the preponderance of these circumstances are likely even more unsettling. These types of traumatic experiences have been associated with a range of outcomes that directly affect education, such as “including adverse effects on cognitive functioning, attention, memory, academic performance, and school-related behaviors” (Maynard et al).

University of Phoenix’s student body represents a broad spectrum of learners who may have experienced obstacles to their education, including women, people of color, and those affiliated with the military. Indeed, as an institution of higher education founded to serve adult learners and working adults—who face additional stresses of working, caring for a family, and increased financial demands—University of Phoenix educators have a unique responsibility to provide a learning environment that understand trauma and provides the security necessary for these learners to develop skills they need in the workplace, and in the world. Furthermore, this responsibility extends to all higher education institutions, especially as adult learners and nontraditional students become the norm.

This responsibility brings opportunity. University of Phoenix students may face additional stress, but this in turn means they are uniquely situated to provide their perspectives on trauma and stress. With a student body potentially benefitting from trauma-informed education, University of Phoenix can implement and hone trauma-informed methodologies in the classroom and become a leader in a mode of education that, as stated before, is likely to become more common—as well as more necessary.

Spotlight: Spotting Trauma

Identifying when a student is struggling due to trauma can be difficult, but educators can consider many indicators, including the following:

- **Changes in behavior:** Students may suddenly withdraw from group activities, be reluctant to participate in discussions, or demonstrate erratic attendance patterns.
- **Difficulty concentrating:** Students may struggle with focus, be easily distracted, or frequently miss deadlines.
- **Fatigue or hypervigilance:** Some students may appear overly anxious, continuously seeking clarification, or seem exhausted.
- **Emotional dysregulation:** Students may have emotional outbursts, extreme frustration, or disengagement as signs of underlying trauma.
- **Avoidance:** Students may avoid specific topics, discussions, or assignments that trigger traumatic memories or emotions.

Principles of Trauma-Informed Education

Trauma-informed education is a mode of teaching in which educators recognize and acknowledge how their students' previous and current stressors or trauma may affect how they respond in educational environments and beyond. Using this model, educators engender a classroom of inclusivity, compassion, and acceptance.

For many educators, this will sound familiar, both in their own classroom as well as in their industry more broadly; this reaffirms that educational institutions are particularly situated to provide this environment, both because their student bodies have experienced trauma, and because educational journeys are more likely to succeed when this trauma is understood and addressed. Adapting trauma-informed methodologies can then be understood as formalizing these underlying principles that educators already know so well, and bringing them to the foreground. Per the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), trauma-informed approaches rely on the following principles:

- **Physical and emotional safety:** Create a safe space where students feel comfortable sharing their ideas.
- **Open communication:** Use clear, consistent messaging about assignments, schedules, and expectations. Be transparent about course policies, grading, and participation requirements.
- **Collaboration:** Involve students in decision-making processes, including flexible deadlines.
- **Peer support:** Encourage students to support one another in a non-judgmental space.

- **Empowerment:** Empower students with autonomy and voice in their learning journey.
- **Cultural humility:** Be mindful of inclusive language and diverse cultural perspectives. Be mindful of varied cultural backgrounds, perspectives, and learning styles.

Again, these are likely familiar to educators who have operated under these principles either formally or through practice and experience—and adapting trauma-informed education can further enhance how educators do so by providing a number of strategies that are already considered best practice, with the additional context of recognizing and affirming students’ specific experiences. These practices can provide opportunities to overcome the obstacles to education that trauma can leave behind:

- **Build relationships:** Establish strong, trusting relationships by being approachable, offering regular check-ins and office hours for one-on-one support.
- **Predictability and routine:** Create a predictable structure with clear assignment deadlines and consistent feedback. Use weekly summaries to help students anticipate what’s coming or to alert students to a change.
- **Positive reinforcement:** Focus on students' strengths and accomplishments by acknowledging their efforts in online discussions or assignments. Offer praise and encouragement, especially in difficult times.
- **Validation:** Acknowledge students’ feelings and experiences.

Putting these strategies in practice demonstrates to learners that their educational environment is committed to the principles of trauma-informed education. In turn, students can feel more comfortable and capable of pursuing the educational outcomes they were seeking in the first place—as well as cultivate a more empathetic space for their peers in the classroom, at home, in the workplace, and beyond.

Spotlight: Trauma-Informed Education at University of Phoenix

To put trauma-informed education into action, University of Phoenix faculty were invited to multiple webinars, “Thriving Together: Trauma-Informed Faculty & Student Wellness” and “Trauma-Informed Education: Cultivating Compassionate Classrooms.” These webinars were intended to provide insights into the background of trauma-informed education as well as actionable practices for faculty. Supported by additional resources—including blogs and infographics—faculty are able to better understand these principles—not just for their students, but for themselves as well.

Beyond Trauma

Educators, including those at University of Phoenix, owe their students a space of acceptance and compassion, not just for their well-being broadly, but for their education specifically. Trauma-informed education can cultivate classrooms that support student outcomes, including:

- **Improved academic performance:** Students are more likely to engage with the material and perform better when they feel supported and understood.
- **Reduced absenteeism:** Students are more likely to attend classes when the environment is supportive and free from triggering stressors.
- **Enhanced student engagement:** Trauma-informed practices help students feel connected to the learning community, fostering active participation.
- **Fosters a supportive school culture:** By embracing trauma-informed practices, educators contribute to a caring, inclusive online culture that benefits all students.

With these in place, institutes of higher education cultivate an environment of better learning outcomes, improved retention, and—perhaps most importantly—a culture that recognizes the individual humanity of every student and educator alike.

Spotlight: How Trauma-Informed Education Supports Educators

As burnout becomes all too common, not just in educational workplaces but across all industries, understanding how employees—not just students—benefit from trauma-informed principles has become a priority at University of Phoenix. Trauma-informed principles benefit educators as well as learners, providing a compassionate work environment that can allay stress and improve retention.

As organizations—including not just schools but also businesses—struggle with turnover and burnout, trauma-informed approaches cultivate environments conducive to improved morale and, in turn, improved retention.

Putting Trauma-Informed Principles Into Action

A traumatic world demands trauma-informed practices, and trauma-informed practices must begin where they can best transfer from the abstract into real-world application. Classrooms—already spaces where educators strive to provide comfort and security in addition to the impetus for challenges and growth—invite trauma-informed principles not just because students and faculty require them: Establishing these principles as a core part of the educational experience allows students to carry them out elsewhere, including their career and personal lives. Beyond the immediate business impact of improved educational outcomes, and even beyond the more deeply felt impact of improved

individual wellness, trauma-informed education provides scaffolding for a more empathetic world.

About the Authors

Sheila Babendir, Ed.D., LPC, is a Licensed Professional Counselor and a Counseling Educator. She is the Associate Dean over the Masters of Counseling, at University of Phoenix. She also is co-owner and clinical director of Abundant Hope Integrated Solutions, a behavioral health clinic serving the working population in Arizona. She received her Doctorate degree in Counseling Psychology in 2009 and a Master Degree in Counseling Education/ Counseling Psychology in 1995. Dr. Babendir is committed to advancing the counseling profession as evident through active engagement in professional organizations, conferences and initiatives that promote the evolution and relevance of counseling in our communities.

Barbara Burt, Psy.D., is Program Chair for the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences and a licensed psychologist. She has been teaching at UOPX since 2002 in human services, psychology, and counseling programs. Her advanced training in trauma-focused interventions includes EMDR, Somatic Experiencing, and Accelerated Resolution Therapy (A.R.T.). She serves as a clinical supervisor to new therapists and previously served on the board of directors of the California Association of Marriage and Family Therapists. She holds a doctorate in psychology from Southern California Seminary and a master's degree in Marriage, Family and Child Counseling from University of La Verne.

Michelle Crawford-Morrison, LMFT, LPCC, NCC, is the Program Chair for Psychology and Human Services. She has over 25 years of direct counseling experience, more than 20 years of supervising and training interns, and 18 years of teaching at the University of Phoenix. Michelle's clinical approach integrates family systems, cognitive-behavioral, and attachment theories to support individuals navigating depression, anxiety, and trauma across personal, social, and professional domains. She has contributed as a subject matter expert in revising curriculum for the online MSC/MFCT program and Psychology courses. Michelle is an active member of professional organizations including APA, AAMFT, CAMFT, ACA, and the OC MFT Consortium.

Samantha E. Dutton, PhD, LCSW(r), is an experienced executive and educator with 25+ years in healthcare and education. As Associate Dean at University of Phoenix since 2016, she oversees faculty, curriculum, and accreditation for the BSSW program. A retired U.S. Air Force leader, she managed clinic operations, behavioral medicine, and family support programs, earning top recognition. Dr. Dutton holds a PhD in Social Work and advanced credentials in leadership and disaster management. She actively serves in professional

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Christine Karper, Ph.D., LMHC (QCS), serves as a Program Chair for the Clinical Mental Health Counseling program at the University of Phoenix. She oversees faculty, curriculum, and program assessment. She earned her M.A. in Mental Health Counseling and Ph.D. in Counselor Education and Supervision from the University of Central Florida. As licensed clinician, she is committed to integrated care and client well-being. In academia, she has presented nationally and internationally and published in counseling and psychology journals. Dr. Karper is especially passionate about online education and faculty mentorship, finding great fulfillment in her leadership role at the University of Phoenix.

MaryJo Trombley, Ph.D. serves as Associate Dean of Psychology and Human Services at the University of Phoenix, where she has contributed to higher education since 2005. Appointed as Program Chair in 2009, she additionally co-directed the California Counseling Skills Center from 2019 to 2024. Holding a Ph.D. from Howard University, Dr. Trombley's early professional focus centered on crisis intervention, an experience that shaped her commitment to trauma-informed care. Her dedication to the profession through clinical experience and supervision proved instrumental in supporting students, faculty, and staff understand and implement trauma-informed practices. Dr. Trombley is a licensed psychologist.

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