

UNIVERSAL DESIGN FOR TRAUMA

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OUTLINE

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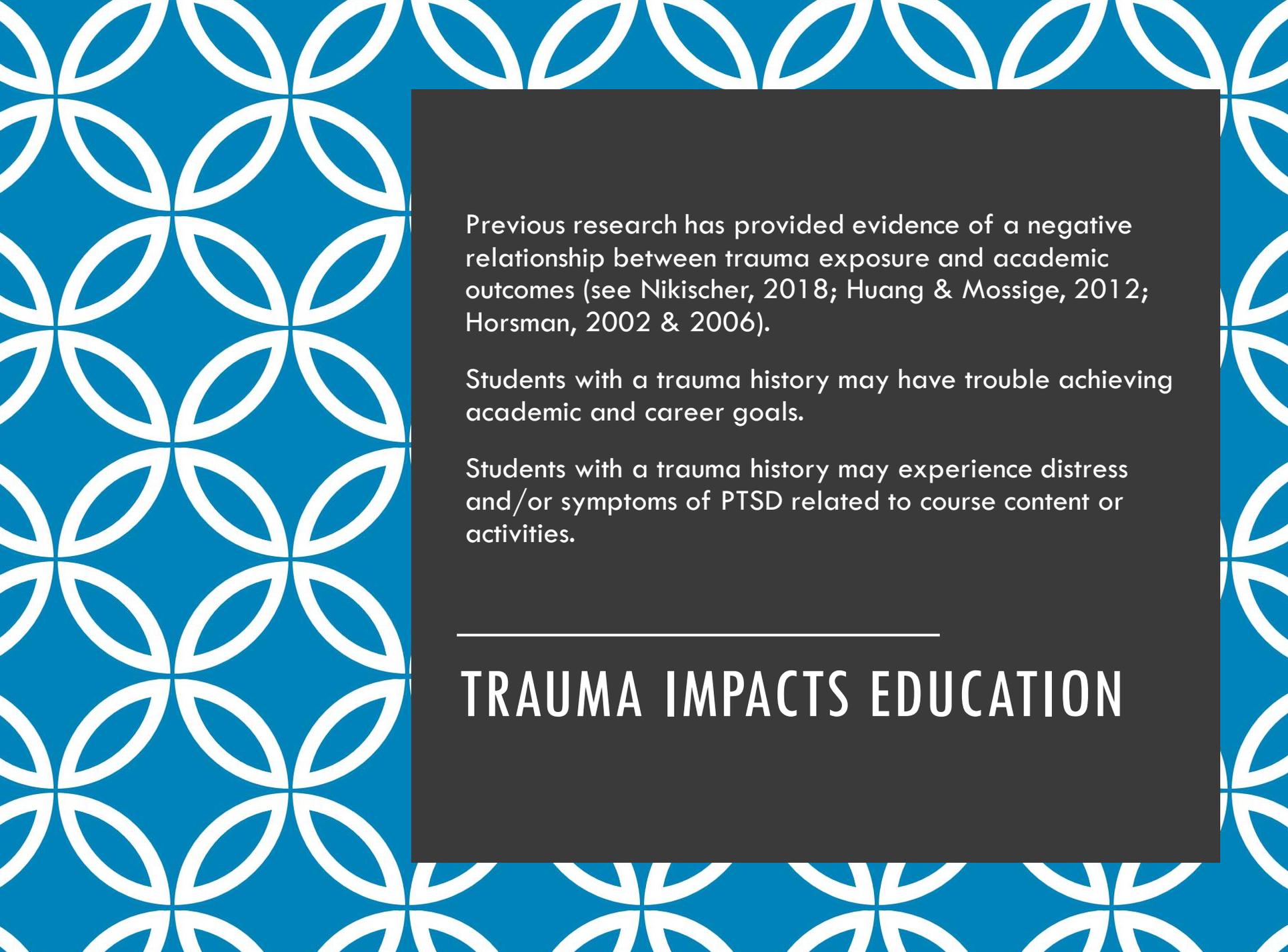
UNDERSTANDING TRAUMA

Over 60% of men and 50% of women in the U.S. report exposure to at least one lifetime traumatic event (National Center for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, n.d.).

“Trauma is an emotional response to an intense event that threatens or causes harm....Trauma can be the result of a single event, or it can result from multiple events over time” (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2014, p. 2).

Traumatic events include domestic and sexual violence, school and mass shootings, community and police violence, suicide, war and refugee experiences, accidents, natural disasters and other local, national and international crises such as the global COVID health crisis.

Exposure to trauma can lead to both short and long-term impacts on physical and emotional health, including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).



Previous research has provided evidence of a negative relationship between trauma exposure and academic outcomes (see Nikischer, 2018; Huang & Mossige, 2012; Horsman, 2002 & 2006).

Students with a trauma history may have trouble achieving academic and career goals.

Students with a trauma history may experience distress and/or symptoms of PTSD related to course content or activities.

TRAUMA IMPACTS EDUCATION

UNIVERSAL DESIGN

Universal design is a concept that began in housing construction and has since been translated into other areas, most notably instructional design.

Universal design seeks to create “barrier-free” environments which are useful for everyone, including all ages and ability levels. Under universal design, user needs are considered and addressed during the design phase and accommodations blend seamlessly into the structure of the home, course, etc.

“Universal design has the unique quality that, when done well, it is invisible” (Mace, 1998, p. 22).

UNIVERSAL DESIGN FOR TRAUMA

Many scholars have connected the concept of universal design specifically to trauma. Bassuk, Latta, Sember, Raja, and Richard (2017), for example, promote universal design for healthcare which includes a focus on trauma.

Kostouros and Wenzel (2016) use the concept of universal design to stress the importance of addressing trauma in curriculum design.

The notion that a curriculum designed to address trauma will ultimately benefit both students with a history of trauma and those without is important and in line with the original vision of universal design for housing. Byron (2017) argues,

Creating classroom spaces that are shaped by the experience of traumatized students not only benefits unhealed students but also provides a more meaningful academic experience for the class as a whole. When students are assured of both their physical and emotional safety, they can more fully engage in classroom discussions, thus promoting a more academically rigorous environment. (p.123)

STEP #1

STRATEGIC CONTENT PLANNING

#1- : Educators must ask themselves an important question: “Is this trauma content central to the learning objectives of the course/program?”

Gratuitous inclusion of potentially distressing content is counter to universal design.

There are many courses, programs, readings and assignments that include potentially distressing content- such as war violence, sexual assault, child abuse and suicide- that add significant value to a student’s learning. But any time an instructor chooses to include trauma topics and materials, that choice must be purposeful and directly tied to learning objectives.

The first step in the process of universal design for trauma is to audit course content and supporting materials.

STEP #2

TRIGGER AND CONTENT WARNINGS

#2- : When educators chose to include trauma topics in their courses, they must recognize and prepare for potential student distress.

Students who have experienced trauma may find it difficult to participate in courses or programs with potentially distressing content, as that content could act as a trauma “trigger.”

A trauma trigger is a “...sight, sound, or smell that conjures up an emotional reaction to a past traumatic event” (Lyford, 2016, p.11). These triggers can create distress and potentially set off symptoms of PTSD in trauma survivors.

Triggering is a complex phenomenon and adverse reactions can be caused by factors as random and unexpected as a particular smell” (Bentley, 2017, p.3). While trauma triggers can be very specific to the individual, for example a sight or sound related to the traumatic event, certain topics, including topics related to trauma (war violence, sexual assault, domestic violence, suicide, etc.), have widespread potential to trigger.

“In academic settings, they [trigger warnings] are written or spoken warnings given by professors to alert students that course material might be traumatic for people with particular life experiences” (Brown, 2016, p. A8).

STEP #2

TRIGGER AND CONTENT WARNINGS

Trigger warnings are meant to blunt the impact of potentially distressing content by alerting students in advance about specific types of content that may be related to previous traumatic experiences (such as child sexual abuse) or that may be particularly graphic (such as images or descriptions of incidents of interpersonal violence).

While there has been concern in academia that trigger warnings in some way reduce rigor, in truth they simply offer students the ability to prepare in advance for potentially distressing material. Carter (2015) argues,

When presented as an access measure, it becomes evident that trigger warnings do not provide a way to "opt out" of anything, nor do they offer protection from the realities of the world. Trigger warnings provide a way to "opt in" by lessening the power of the shock and the unexpectedness, and granting the traumatized individual agency to attend to the affect and effects of their trauma...Such warnings simply allow us to do the work we need to do so that we can participate in the conversation or activity. They allow us to enter the conversation, just like automatic doors allow people who use wheelchairs to more easily enter a building. (p.9)

Trigger and content warnings are an integral part of universal design for trauma and should be considered an educational best practice.

STEP #3

ALTERNATIVE READINGS AND ASSIGNMENTS

#3- Alternative Readings and Assignments: A critical aspect of universal design for trauma is creating opportunities for students to complete alternative readings and assignments.

A critical aspect of universal design for trauma is creating opportunities for students to complete alternative readings and assignments, as appropriate.

Even when trauma content is directly related to course outcomes, there are often opportunities to allow all students choice in how much content they consume and how their learning is assessed.

These opportunities should be built into the course and available to all students without having to request a special accommodation.

Providing a variety of assessment opportunities is already a best practice in universal design for learning.



STEP #4

ACCESS TO CAMPUS AND COMMUNITY RESOURCES

Educators teaching trauma topics must provide students with access to campus and community resources, such as the campus counselling centre and local crisis services organization.

Educators should publish such resources in their course syllabus and in the online course platform.

Students should create their own self-care plan at the beginning of the course.

In addition to providing resources for students to seek assistance, educators must be knowledgeable about local resources and understand their own responsibility for reporting disclosures of interpersonal violence and/or suicide ideation or attempt.



▼ 20SU FAMILY VIOLENCE & ADULT ED 1623 ▲

- Announcements
- Course Information
- Assignment Guidelines
- Student Resources
- Crisis Services
- Buffalo State Counseling Center
- Blackboard Help!
- Open SUNY HelpDesk
- *Ask the Instructor*
- Send Mail

-
- Weekly Folders
 - Discussions
 - Personal Journals
 - Groups ☑

-
- Bulletin Board
 - Gradebook
 - Course Accessibility ☑

COURSE MANAGEMENT

- ▼ Control Panel
- ▶ Files →
- ▶ Course Tools

#5 *INSTRUCTOR PROTECTIONS*

Beyond concern for students, a universal design for trauma must take into account the potential for compassion fatigue and/or vicarious trauma among educators.

While the literature has previously discussed protections for students, including heated debates about trigger and content warnings and best practices for trauma-informed teaching, discussions related to specific protections for educators are just beginning.

This recognition that adult educators can be impacted by teaching, researching and writing trauma provides an important consideration for universal design.

In addition to caring for the emotional health of students, institutions and programs must recognize and address the risks to educators, and educators must purposefully plan in advance for their own self-care.

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