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# Trauma-Informed Pedagogy and Student Engagement: Strategies for Supportive and Safer Learning Environments

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RGASC/ISUP

# LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We wish to acknowledge this land on which the University of Toronto operates. For thousands of years, it has been the traditional land of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, and the Mississaugas of the Credit.

Today, this meeting place is still the home to many Indigenous people from across Turtle Island and we are grateful to have the opportunity to work on this land.



# ACCESS CHECK

Access is a shared responsibility among everyone in this space. While attention has been paid to reduce barriers to participation, I encourage interventions on the following (and more!) to enhance access.

Technology  
Space  
Pace

“We all have bodies, hearts, and minds. We all have needs and capacities, strengths and vulnerabilities”

- *Skin, Tooth, and Bone: A Disability Justice Primer*



# Agenda

1. Welcome
2. Check-in
3. Defining our Terms
4. Four Principles of Trauma-informed Practice
5. Case Study Analysis
6. Somatic Reset Activity



# Session Objectives

1. **Recognize** how trauma can affect behavior, engagement, and learning in the classroom.
2. **Become familiar** w/ key principles of trauma-informed teaching.
3. **Practice** a somatic self-care technique to promote your own well-being.
4. **Apply** one concrete trauma-informed strategy to your teaching.



# Welcoming Remarks

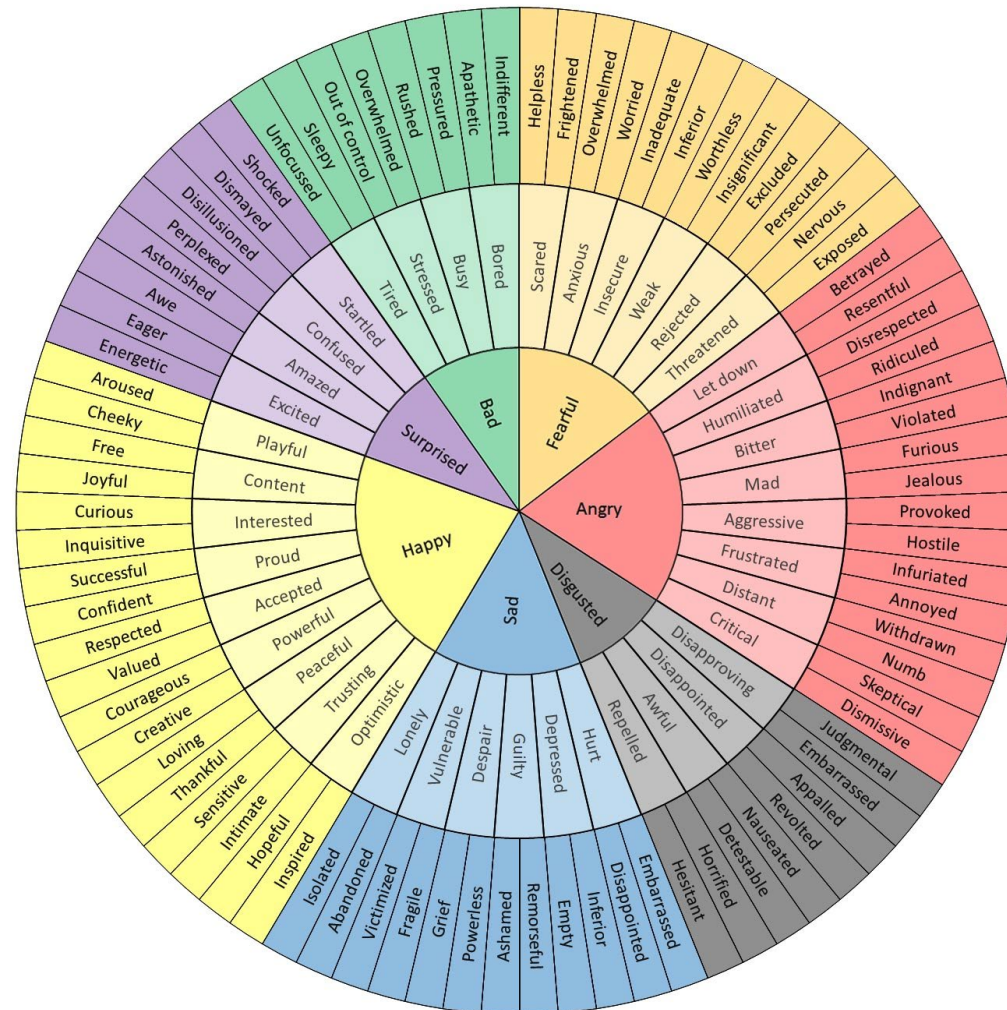
Why 'safer' learning environments and not 'safe'?

A note on sensitive topics

An invitation to care for yourself first and foremost



# How are you *really* feeling?



# Language and Terminology

Trauma (n.) from the Greek for wound

- insidious, complex and everyday trauma
- historical and intergenerational trauma
- small-t trauma

Source: The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM I-5);  
Herman, 2015







“

Trauma is not what happens to us, but what we hold inside in the absence of an empathetic witness

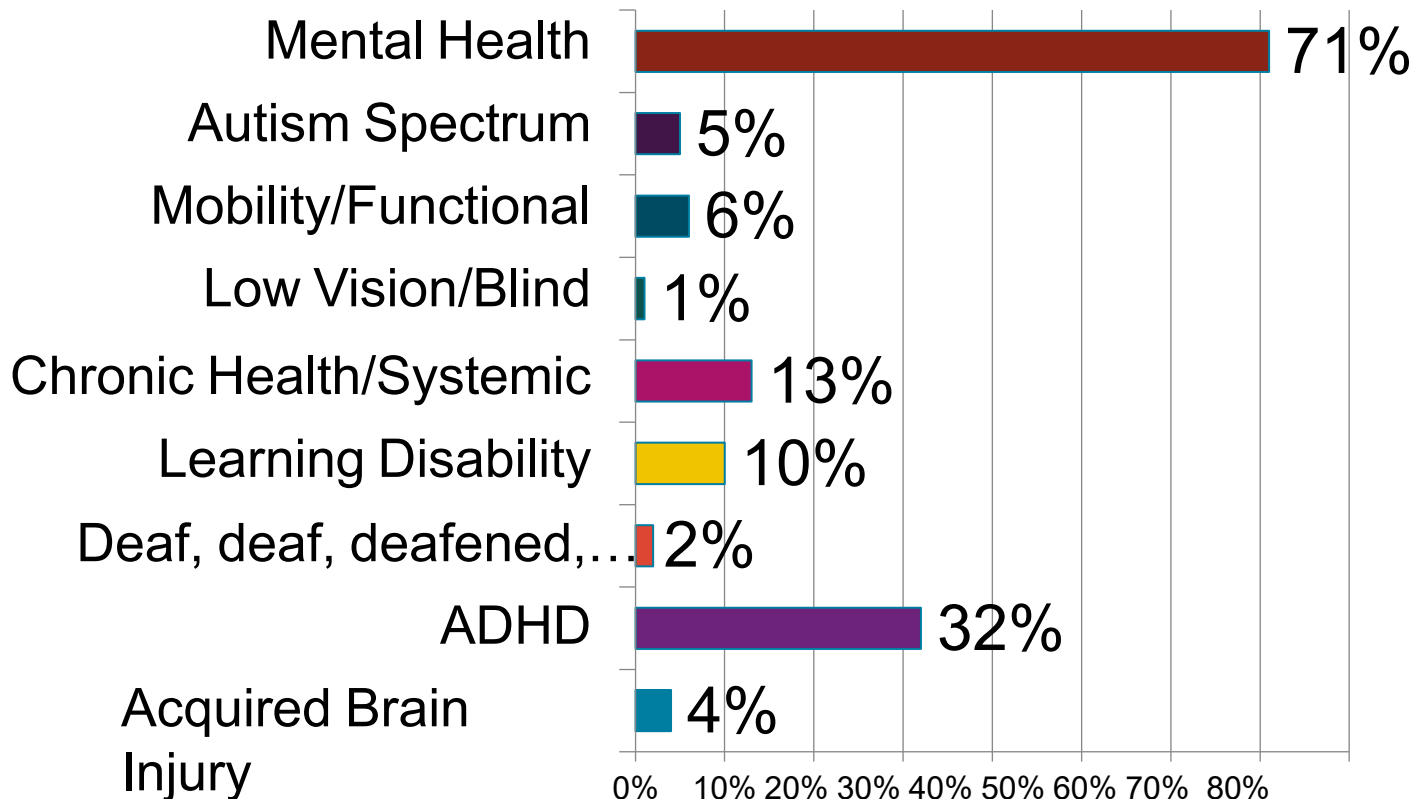
Peter A. Levine

# Why do Students Register with Accessibility Services?

**2023-2024**

Total # of  
Registered Students

**6041**



Note: Numbers are from UTSG and do not add up to 100% because students may be registered with more than one disability.

# Impact on Learning

- Brain development
- Memory
- Sense of safety in the classroom
- Capacity for attention, retention and recall
  - Activated survival responses (fight, flight, freeze or fawn)



# How might trauma show up in the classroom?

- Difficulty focusing, retaining and recalling
- Absenteeism
- Emotional dysregulation (anger, helplessness, dissociation)
- Fear of taking risks
- Anxiety about deadlines, exams, groupwork, presentations
- Isolation
- Involvement in unhealthy relationships

Source: Hoch et al., 2015.



# How might trauma be triggered in the classroom?

Classroom activities that could trigger, or exacerbate trauma:

1. Calling on Students Unexpectedly
2. Surprise Assessments or High-Stakes Testing
3. Under-moderated discussions on sensitive topics
4. Ignoring systemic trauma and power imbalances
5. Rigid attendance or participation policies



# Trauma-Informed Teaching



What might it look like and why might we need it?



# 4 Principles of Trauma-Informed Practice

**REALIZE** the widespread impact and prevalence of trauma

**RECOGNIZE** symptoms of dysregulation (trauma responses), and high risk potential for traumatization

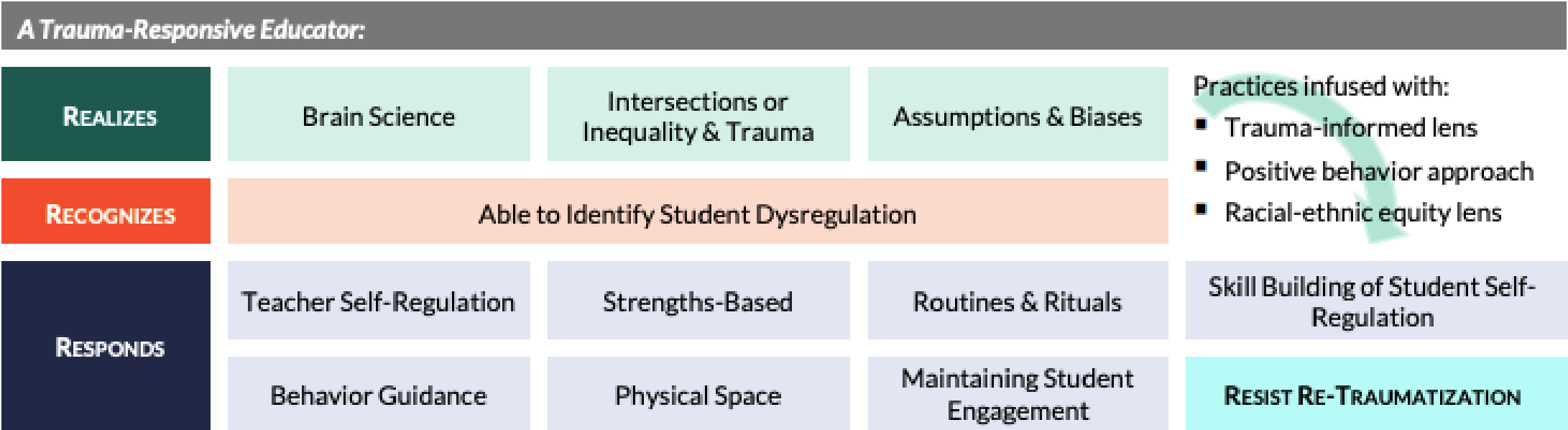
**RESPOND** by providing appropriate support and service

**RESIST** re-traumatization by vetting practices through a trauma-informed lens (will it create harm?)

Source: SAMSHA Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration



# 4 Principles in the Classroom



Source: Trauma-Responsive Educational Practices Project<sup>47</sup>

Source: Hanover Research 2019, Washington Association of School Administrators





# Case Study

## 🎓 Scenario: The Disappearing Student

Jordan, a second-year student, was highly engaged during the first half of the semester, participating in class and submitting assignments on time. Around midterm, Jordan stops attending class, misses two major assignments, and hasn't responded to an email since telling you he was having a bit of a tough a time.

What's going on here? How might we respond in a trauma-informed way?



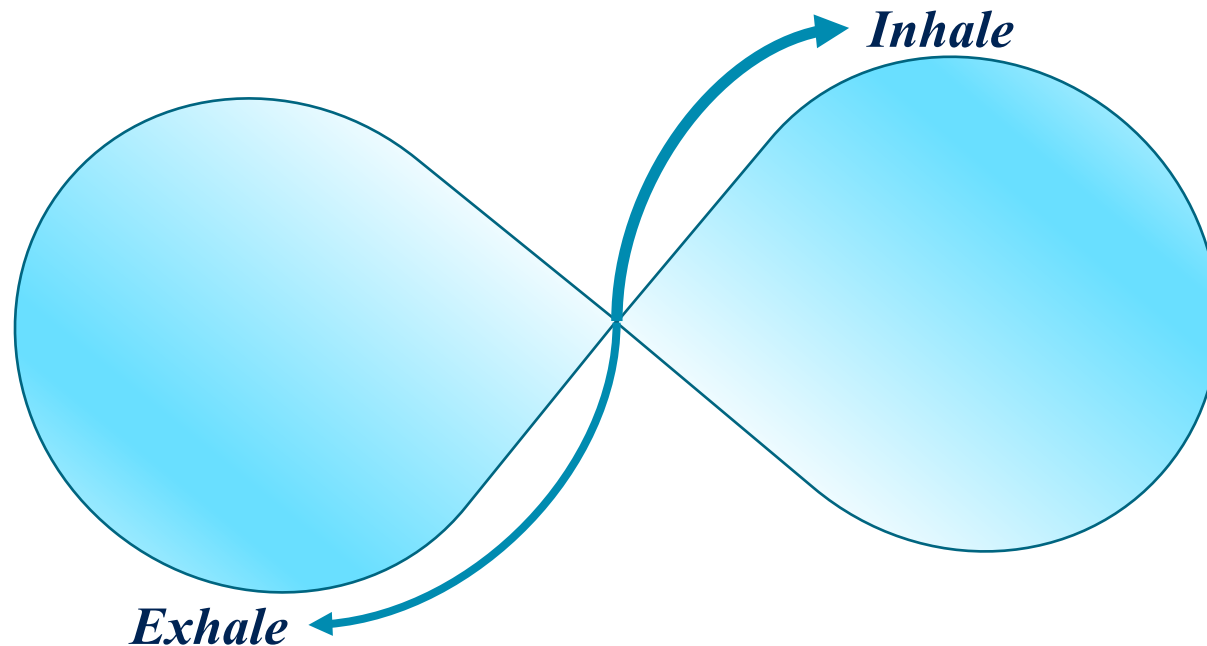
# Evidence-Based Toolkit



# Somatic Reset Activity

Somatic practices for trauma-informed care focus on reconnecting the mind and body to regulate the nervous system and promote psycho-emotional processing.

Figure 8 breathing exercise:





“

“Recovery can take place only within the context of relationships; it cannot occur in isolation.”

Judith Herman,  
*Trauma and  
Recovery*



# Toolkit

[Trauma-Informed Practices for Postsecondary Education](#)

[Trauma-informed self-assessment](#)

[Principles to enhance classroom emotional safety](#)

[Teaching and learning as embodied](#) (THE Resource)

[Discomfort as bodily sensation](#) (PNAS article "Bodily maps of emotions")

[Somatic practices can regulate CNS and help you effectively facilitate](#)

(Arizona Trauma Institute)



**Upcoming offering:** The Neuroinclusive Classroom workshop: Oct 8th (In-person)  
Oct 10<sup>th</sup> (Online)



# References

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# Thank You!

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