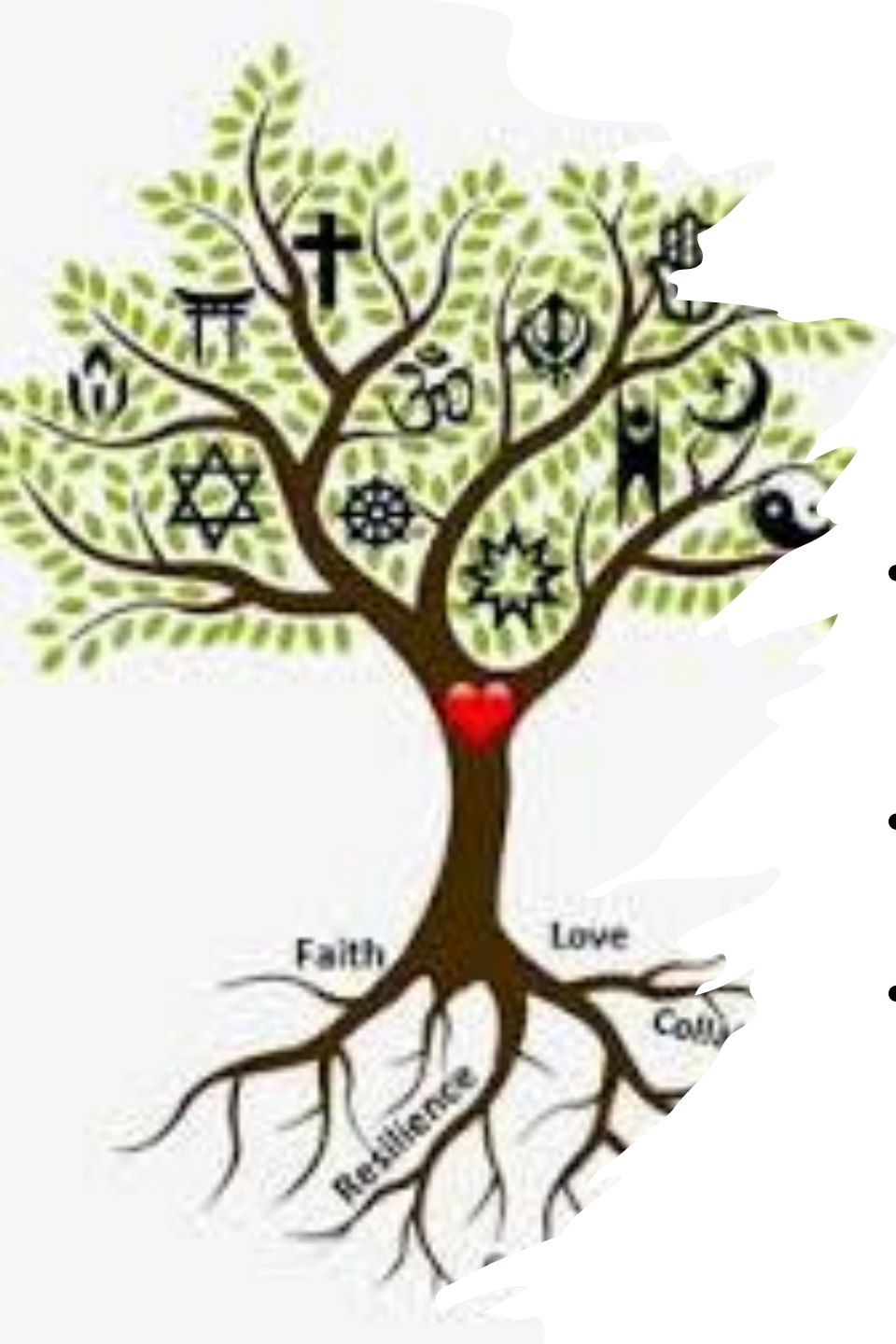




The Calm Before the Learn: Creating Trauma-Informed Classrooms for Teachers and Students

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Objectives

- Understand trauma and its impact on learning and behavior
- Recognize signs of trauma in students
- Describe 10 trauma-informed practices (TIPS) for classrooms

Why this Session Matters?

- **1 in 4 children** will experience trauma before the age of 16 (NCTSN).
- **Trauma can mimic ADHD** and other behavioral disorders.
- **Unaddressed trauma** increases the risk of academic struggles, school avoidance, and behavioral challenges.
- **A trauma-informed teacher** can **change a child's trajectory** by providing safety, connection, and regulation.



What is Trauma?

Trauma is a psychological, emotional, and physiological response to an event or series of events that are distressing, overwhelming, or perceived as a threat to one's well-being. It can significantly affect a child's development, behavior, and learning ability.

Key Definitions of Trauma:

- **American Psychological Association (APA, 2015):**
“Trauma is an emotional response to a terrible event.”
- **National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN):**
“A traumatic event is a frightening, dangerous, or violent event that poses a threat to a child's life or bodily integrity.”
- **Dr. Bruce Perry’s Perspective:**
“Trauma is not just what happens to a person; it’s how the brain and body respond to that event.”

Trauma is NOT Just the Event— It's the Body's Response

Trauma is less about the **event itself** and more about how the **nervous system** and **brain** process and store the experience.

"It's not just what happens to you that matters, but how your body and brain interpret it."

— Dr. van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*

Big “T”, Little ‘t’, & Complex Trauma: The Importance of Understanding the Difference

Trauma is not a one-size-fits-all experience. It can manifest in various forms, impacting individuals differently based on personal resilience, coping strategies, and support systems.



Big "T" Trauma: Acute, Life-Threatening Events

Definition:

Big "T" Trauma refers to significant, life-threatening, or catastrophic events that cause intense distress and disruption to an individual's sense of safety and security.

Examples:

- Physical or sexual abuse
- Natural disasters (hurricanes, earthquakes, fires)
- Severe car accidents
- Acts of violence (school shootings, assault)
- War and refugee experiences
- Serious injury or life-threatening illness
- Sudden or traumatic loss of a loved one

Little "t" Trauma: Chronic, Non-Life-Threatening Stressors

Definition:

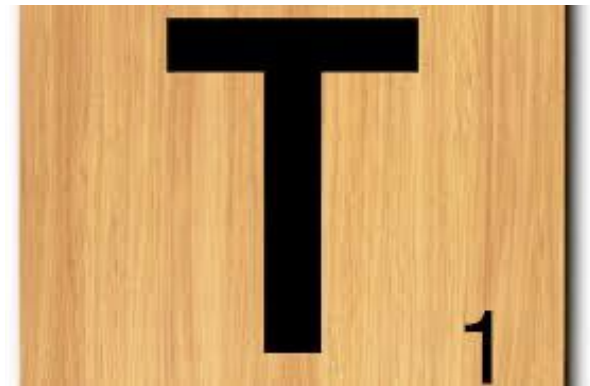
Little "t" trauma includes ongoing, non-life-threatening events that still cause significant stress, emotional distress, or a sense of insecurity. These experiences may accumulate over time and impact mental health.

Examples:

- Bullying or social exclusion
- Academic pressure and repeated failure
- Divorce or separation of parents
- Moving to a new school
- Witnessing family conflict
- Chronic illness in a family member
- Financial instability or food insecurity

Other Types of Trauma Explained

- Acute Trauma: A single, intense traumatic event.
- Chronic Trauma: Repeated exposure to distress over time.
- Complex Trauma: Multiple, interconnected traumatic experiences.
- Other Trauma Types: Vicarious, Historical, Collective, Intergenerational, and Life Transitions.



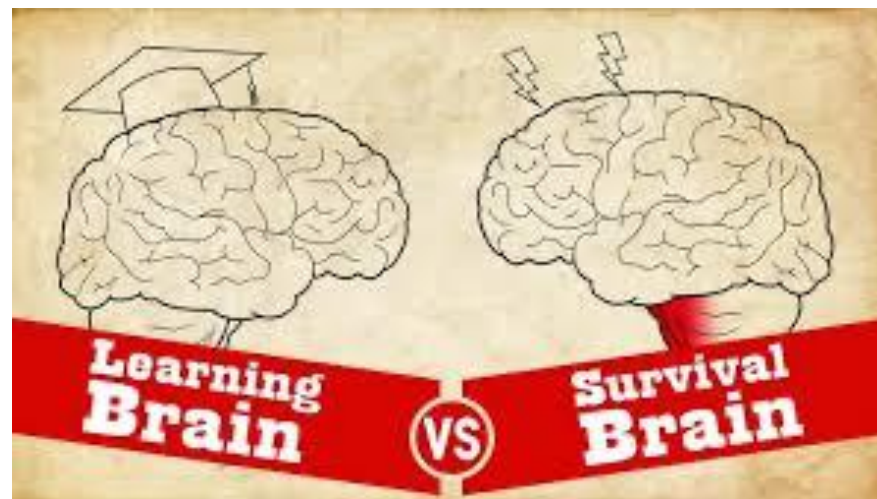
How Trauma Affects Students in the Classroom

- **Cognitive Impact:** Difficulty concentrating, memory issues, and decreased executive functioning
- **Emotional Regulation:** Frequent outbursts, withdrawal, anxiety, or difficulty managing emotions
- **Behavioral Responses:** Hyperactivity, aggression, defiance, or extreme compliance
- **Relational Challenges:** Difficulty trusting teachers and peers, attachment disruptions



How Trauma Impacts Learning

- The brain prioritizes survival over learning.
- Trauma disrupts executive functioning and self-regulation.
- Relational safety is key to engagement in learning.

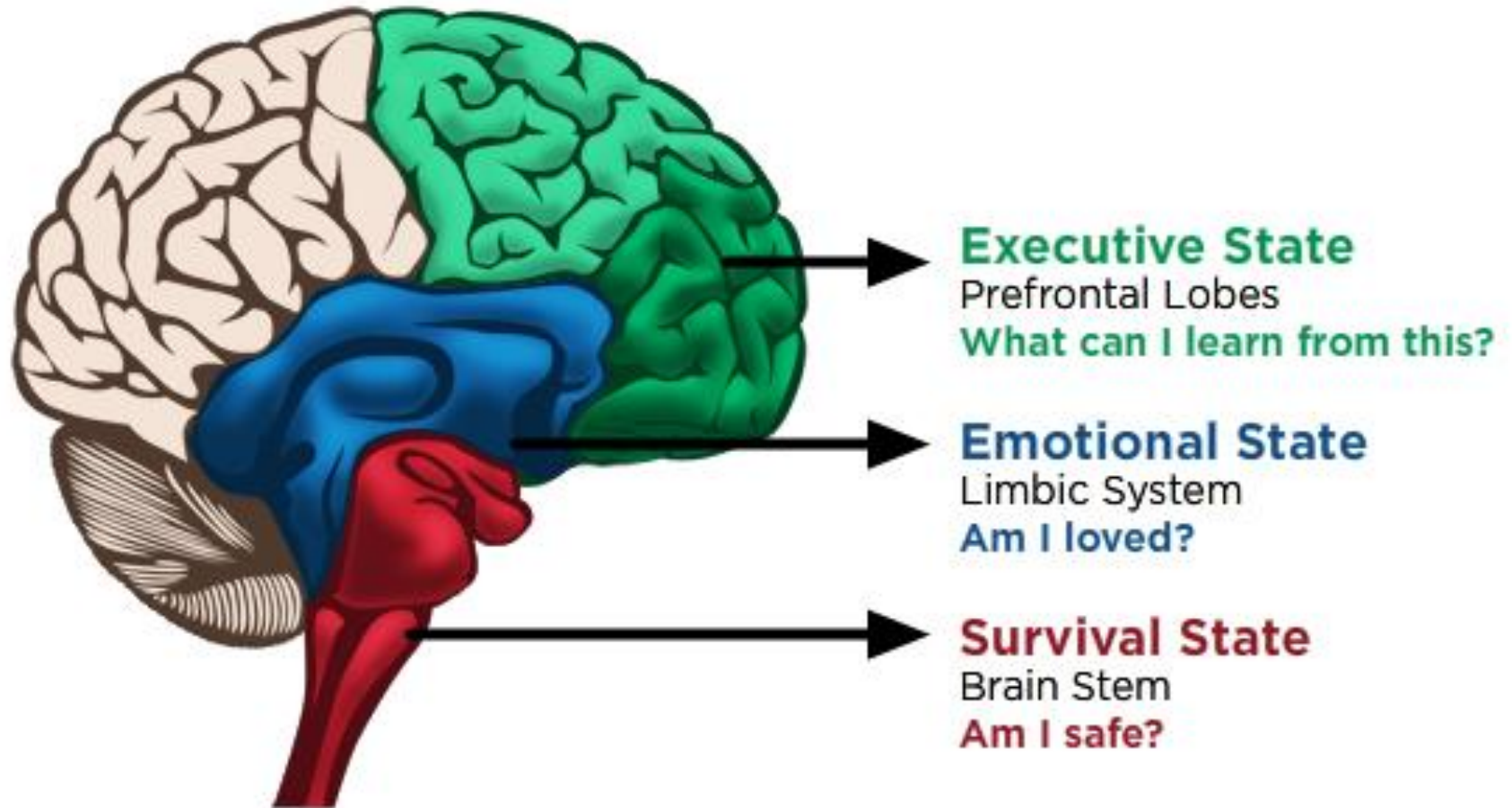


Recognizing Signs of Trauma in Students

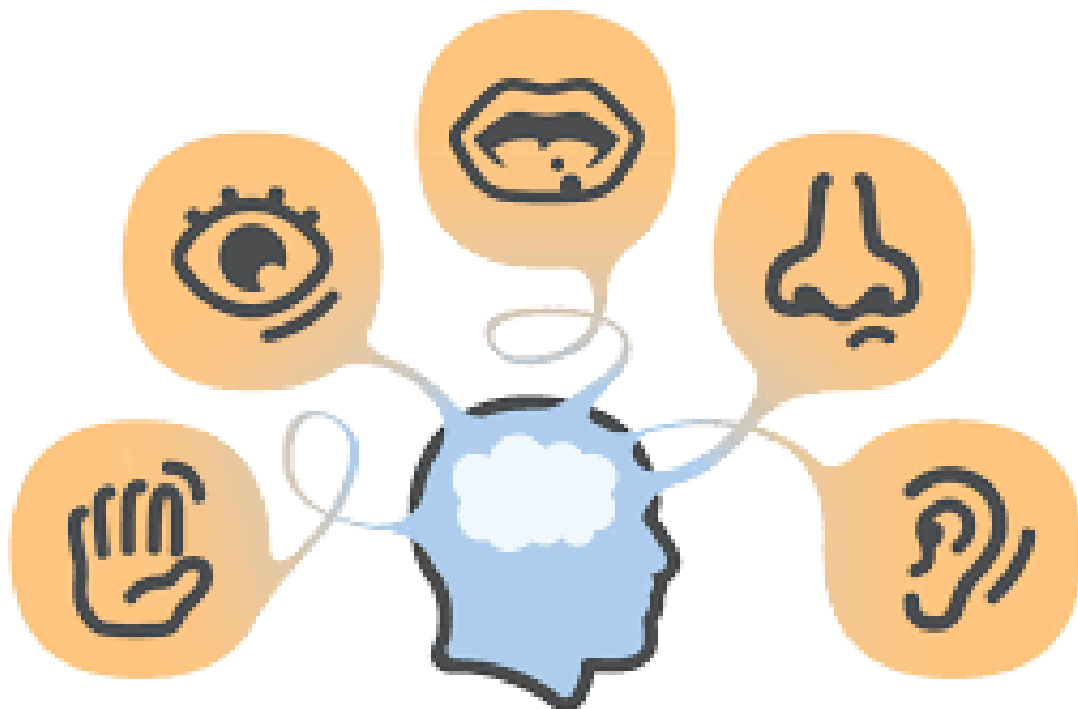
- Hypervigilance or easily startled
- Difficulty forming relationships or trusting adults
- Emotional dysregulation (outbursts, withdrawal, anxiety)
- School avoidance and disengagement
- Signs of dissociation (zoning out, forgetfulness, disconnection)



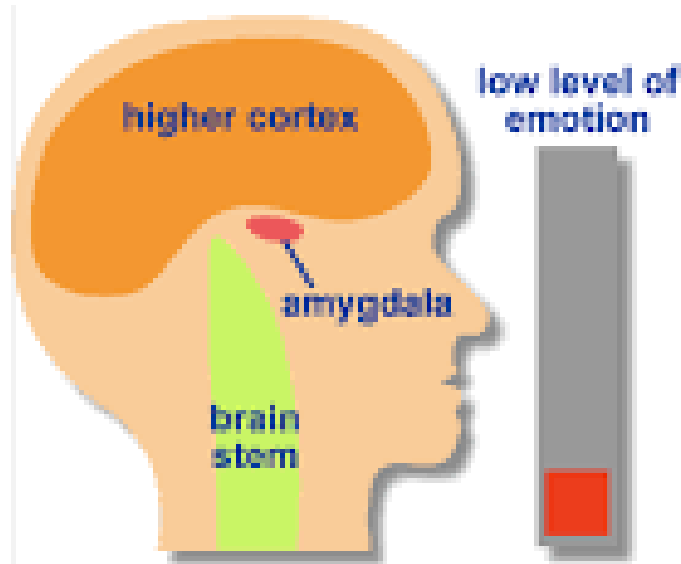
The Brain & Trauma



Triggers Through the 5 Senses

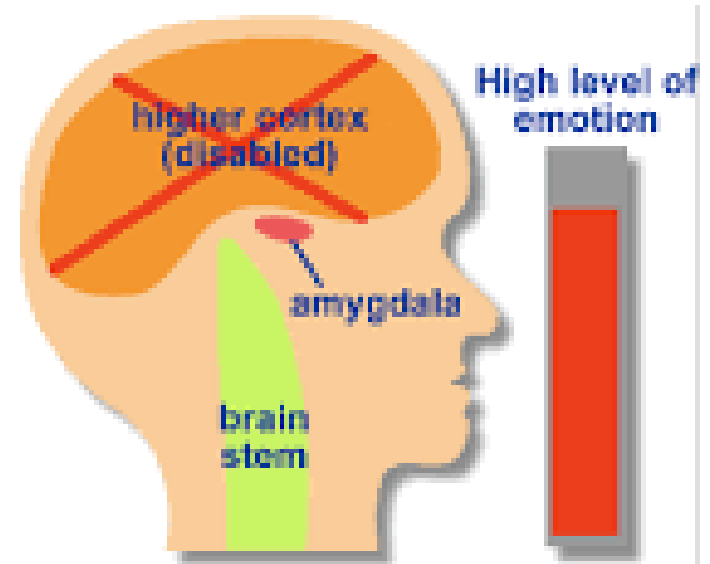


When Triggers Happen...



Low emotion

(calm, relaxed)



High emotion

(anger, fear, excitement, love,
hate, disgust, frustration)

5 TRAUMA RESPONSES



Parasympathetic
Body at rest

Sympathetic
Emergency situations

Eyes

Constricts pupils

Dilates pupils

Heart

Beat more slowly

Beats faster and stronger

Lungs

Constricts airways

Relaxes airways, which lets
you breathe more deeply

Digestion

Stimulates digestion

Inhibits digestion

Muscles

Reduces blood flow to
skeletal muscles

Increases blood flow to
skeletal muscles



10 TIPS for Teachers

1. Build strong & trusting relationships
2. Create a safe space for emotional regulation
3. Establish Predictable Routines & Structure
4. Teach Social Emotional-Regulation Skills
5. Use Restorative Rather than Punitive Discipline
6. Provide Student Autonomy & Choices
7. Encourage Peer Support & Collaboration
8. Be Aware of Trauma Triggers & Adjust Accordingly
9. Model Self-Regulation & Resilience
10. Encourage Alternative Forms of Expression

1. Build Strong Trusting Relationships

- Prioritize **warm greetings, daily check-ins, and positive affirmations.**
- Use **positive reinforcement and encouragement**
- Show **empathy and active listening**
- Create a sense of **belonging and connection**
- Get to **know the student's likes & dislikes**
- **Connection before correction:**
Students need to feel safe before they can learn.





2. Create a Safe Space for Emotional Regulation

- Ensure **seating arrangements** promote a sense of safety.
- **Reduce loud noises** and **overstimulating** environments.
- **Designate a calm corner** or regulation zone for students to reset.
- Normalize **mindfulness**, **breathing exercises**, and **emotional check-ins**.
- Use **soft lighting** and **calming décor**.

3. Establish Predictable Routines & Structure

- Consistency helps regulate students who have experienced unpredictability.
- Provide visual schedules and clear expectations
- Use consistent structured transitions and classroom procedures
- Prepare students for changes in routine



4. Teach Social Emotional Regulation Skills



- Teach **empathy, self-awareness, and social skills** through structured lessons.
- Incorporate **breathing exercises** and **mindfulness**
- Teach students how to **identify and manage emotions**
- Use **calm-down corners** or **reflection spaces** (*must be student-initiated)
- **Model emotional regulation & self-calming strategies**



5. Use Restorative Rather than Punitive Discipline

- ✓ Builds a **sense of belonging** and accountability instead of isolation
- ✓ Helps students **learn from mistakes** rather than fear consequences
- ✓ Encourages **self-awareness and problem-solving**
- ✓ Strengthens **teacher-student relationships** rather than increasing power struggles
- ✓ Use phrases like '**How can I help?**' instead of 'What's wrong with you?'
- ✓ **Validates student feelings** and experiences

Key Restorative Practices for the Classroom

- **Restorative Circles** – Structured group discussions that help students **resolve conflicts**, express feelings, and find solutions together.
- **Reflective Conversations** – Instead of jumping to consequences, ask:
 - *"What happened?"*
 - *"Who was affected?"*
 - *"How can we make things right?"*
- **Behavior Repair Plans** – Have students take ownership by **creating solutions** to repair the harm they caused.
- **Logical Consequences** – Instead of **automatic punishments**, consequences should **connect to the action** (e.g., if a student damages something, they help fix or replace it).
- **Calm-Down & Re-Entry Strategies** – If students leave **the classroom due to emotional distress**, they should have a structured **re-entry conversation** to reflect and plan next steps.

What to Avoid

- ⊘ **Public shaming** (e.g., name on the board, loss of privileges in front of peers)
- ⊘ **Strict level/point-based systems** (students with trauma often struggle with compliance)
- ⊘ **Zero-tolerance policies** (they disproportionately harm students with ACEs)
- ⊘ **Sending students away from the connection** (instead, integrate regulation and repair strategies)



✨ Trauma-informed classrooms don't ignore behavior—but they focus on healing, accountability, and growth rather than punishment. ✨

6. Provide Student Autonomy & Choices

- Trauma can make students feel powerless.
- **Giving choices** restores a sense of control.
- Let students choose **seating, project formats, or break activities.**
- Offer **choices in learning activities**
- Allow **movement breaks** and **fidgets**
- Use **student-led goal-setting**
- **Empower students** to take ownership of their learning



7. Encourage Peer Support & Collaboration

- Promote cooperative learning activities
- Teach conflict resolution and social skills
- Pair students with peer buddies or mentors
- Encourage team-building exercises



8. Be Aware of Trauma Triggers & Adjust Accordingly

- Recognize potential trauma triggers (e.g., **Loud noises, sudden transitions, or personal space violations**)
- Provide **preparation for changes, quiet time, and alternative coping strategies.**
- Provide **alternative options** for triggering assignments
- **Check-in with students** who seem dysregulated
- Create a **predictable and responsive environment**



9. Model Self-Regulation & Resilience

- **Co-regulation before self-regulation:**
Teachers must model calm behavior.
- **Stay calm and composed** in stressful situations
- Use **grounding techniques, soft voice tones, and positive reinforcement.**
- **Practice mindfulness and self-care** as an educator
- **Be transparent about emotions** in an age-appropriate way
- **Encourage a growth mindset** in students



10. Encourage Alternative Forms of Expression

- ◆ Journaling & Writing Prompts
- ◆ Drawing & Art Activities
- ◆ Music & Sound Therapy
- ◆ Movement-Based Expression
- ◆ Drama & Role-Playing
- ◆ Guided Visualization & Storytelling
- ◆ Hands-on Sensory Activities
- ◆ Poetry & Spoken Word
- ◆ Photography & Digital Storytelling

