Tips for Supporting Students Who Have Experienced Trauma

Make sure that the student's environment is – and feels – as safe as possible

- Minimize fighting, arguing, or raised voices that might seem like they will lead to violence.
- Allow the student to access quiet or calm spaces as needed throughout the school day.
- Make sure there is a safe way for the student to travel to and from school.

Give voice and choice to the student

- Trauma experiences often involve powerlessness. Help the student feel a sense of power by giving them a voice in what they might need to feel more successful in the classroom.

Create a safety plan for situations where there may be ongoing dangers (e.g., domestic violence, unsafe neighborhoods)

- Set up a written plan for specific risky situations.
- Have back-up plans for getting in contact with safe adult when separated or unable to reach by usual methods.
- Identify safe people and places that students can turn to, if necessary.
- Report any suspected child abuse or neglect.

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Help students approach non-dangerous situations to learn they can handle them

- Identify people, places, and topics – things that may be reminders of the trauma but are not in themselves dangerous – to which the child seems to be reacting strongly or avoiding.
- Support students in approaching, rather than avoiding, non-dangerous reminders.
- Help them learn to tell the difference between dangerous and non-dangerous reminders (e.g., every raised voice is not a sign of impending violence or aggression).
- Remember to give them choice.
- Give praise for effort.

Increase support and reassurance from caregivers

- Give a lot of reassurance. Be specific that the situation is safe now.
- Be careful not to communicate that because of the trauma the world should be seen as a very dangerous place.

Make sure students have coping skills they can use

- Review coping skills such as relaxation, breathing, distraction (listening to a favorite song, game), mindfulness, distress tolerance, or meditating. Identify which ones the child is likely to use, and practice it with him or her.
- Prompt the student practice and use effective coping skills when he or she seems to be getting anxious or worried unnecessarily.

Help students see their own strengths and points of resilience

- Put extra effort into pointing out the student’s positive qualities, achievements, and ways they are trying to cope.
- Spend time being a positive influence in their life – this helps build resilience.

TF-CBT is a proven treatment

- Encourage counseling and help students find a therapist who can provide trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy (TF-CBT).

These strategies can prevent brain changes from becoming permanent and restore normal functioning. You can help support your students’ brain development and learning!