

# Psychological trauma: Implications for schools

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## 1. Trauma: What is it?

Trauma is a natural, neuro-chemical response to any experience in which a person feels powerless and overwhelmed in the face of life-threatening or life-changing circumstance. Traumatic experience causes permanent changes in the brain. Any event that induces a state of intense fear, helplessness, horror, or chronic victimization can trigger traumatic memories. Those who experience, witness, or identify closely with trauma victims are also at risk.

A severe trauma response such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is more likely to result from physical assault, car accidents, suicide or sudden death of a friend or loved one, and exposure to chronic abuse or life-threatening situations.

## 2. How common is traumatic stress among school students?

Almost half the nation's children have experienced at least one or more types of serious childhood trauma. Nearly a third of U.S. youth age 12-17 have experienced two or more types of childhood adversity that are likely to affect their physical and mental health as adults (results of a 2013 survey sponsored by the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services).

## 3. What changes in behavior are associated with trauma?

- anxiety and edginess
- anger, defensiveness
- oppositional behavior
- moodiness
- depression
- trouble focusing, disorientation
- isolation, withdrawal from activities and friends
- difficulty sleeping, fatigue, malaise

## 4. What challenges does trauma cause for students?

- impaired short- and long-term memory
- cognitive processing difficulties
- disruptive behavior (increased likelihood of suspension and/or expulsion)
- decreased reading ability; difficulty with fluency and expression
- decrease in overall school performance
- impaired critical thinking, ability to solve problems
- increased number of school absences.

## 5. Does everyone respond to traumatic situations the same?

No, there is no universal response to trauma and no set timetable for recovery.

Some individuals demonstrate **hyperarousal**, showing their trauma outwardly by becoming aggressive, easily angered, stubborn, defensive, and quick to take offense. Others, more commonly girls, **dissociate** or withdraw inward, becoming overly compliant, self-critical, and obsessive about getting good grades and “doing it right.” Students who dissociate are less likely to be noticed than those who demonstrate hyperarousal because they seem to be doing so well. The consequences of unrecognized trauma can lead to obsessive-compulsive behaviors that pose a threat to well being, including cutting, bulimia, isolation, suicide ideation.

## 6. How can schools help students dealing with the trauma?

Educators, school safety personnel, and all who interact with students need opportunities to learn about the effects of trauma and how to modify curriculum and environments to meet needs brought on by trauma. Effective classroom modifications include the following:

- Smaller units of study
- More hands-on assignments and more small group activities
- Alternative assignments that don't rely on verbal skills (e.g., conceptual mapping, arts-based activities, read-listen-see, etc.)
- Safety zones or "time-out spaces" for students needing a place to withdraw and regroup
- Behavior code that has been developed with student input and consensus
- Opportunities for students to participate in decision-making and have their voices heard
- Student-generated public service projects.

## 7. What can schools do to help students build resilience and possibly prevent violence?

Connections and relationships that help heal trauma's wounds also nurture emotional strength before. Research shows that schools where students feel accepted and valued have a lower incidence of drug-abuse, violence, and anti-social behavior. Building a sense of community promotes healthy emotional development and can serve a preventative function. The following strategies have proven helpful in building strength that promotes resilience:

- Sponsoring collaborative service projects
- Preparing students to think critically and creatively in conflict resolution
- Providing stress reduction training (e.g., yoga as a phys. ed. elective)
- Creating a culture of mutual respect, inclusion, and support
- Ensuring that students have a trusting relationship with at least one adult at school
- Building a strong sense of the school as a shared, interdependent community
- Giving students a voice in planning school-related activities and events
- Developing trauma-awareness as a life skill.