MAKING SENSE OF TRAUMA
Practical Tools for Responding to Children and Youth
2016-2017

Getting Started
www.makingsenseoftrauma.ca

Objectives

• Develop an understanding of the impact of trauma on children/youth
• Learn the principles of trauma-informed care
• Explore the current understanding of the nervous system and trauma survival responses
• Identify specific tools that assist with freeze/flight/fight survival responses in children and youth
Being Trauma-Informed

- Provides a new paradigm that views trauma as an injury
- The shift is from “What is wrong with you?” to “What has happened to you?”
- Understands freeze, flight and fight as survival responses
- Recognizes that trauma is pervasive
- ACE Study - Adverse Childhood Experiences
  - Trauma in childhood can impact adult physical and mental health (1998)
  - www.acestoohigh

Principles of Being Trauma-Informed

- Safety
- Empowerment, voice and choice
- Trustworthiness and transparency
- Peer support
- Collaboration and mutuality
- Cultural, historical, and gender issues

What Is Trauma?
Defining Trauma

“Trauma is when we have encountered an out of control, frightening experience that has disconnected us from all sense of resourcefulness or safety or coping or love.”

Bracha, 2011

“...the common denominator of psychological trauma is the feeling of “intense fear, helplessness, loss of control and threat of annihilation”

Herman, 1992

When A Child Or Adult’s Trauma Is Unresolved

They often:

• Feel unsafe
• Feel disconnected from self, family, friends, community, spirituality
• Are unable to regulate mood, emotions, or behavior
• Live in freeze, flight and fight survival responses
• Are on guard, hyper-vigilant
• Feel helpless – A loss of choice and voice
History: How We Have Thought About Trauma

- We used to not talk about trauma
- Then we focused on telling your whole story
  - Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD diagnosis added in 1980)
- Now we talk about the impact of trauma on the nervous system and how to regulate it
- Now we are beginning to recognize the impact of historical trauma
- Now we are beginning to acknowledge cultural differences in healing
- Now we focus on the importance of how we tell our stories in order to make meaning in our lives

Making Sense of Trauma

- Trauma is in the responses of the nervous system (Levine, 1997)
- What is traumatic for one child or youth (adult) may not be for another:
  - Frequency, duration and severity of the traumatic event and their developmental stage
  - Moving from a mixed up story to a coherent narrative

Keeping your balance

- We invite you to take a break and settle yourself:
  - Move in some way, take time to stretch
  - Take some deep, even slow breaths
  - Bring to mind someone who you find comforting
  - Have something to eat or drink
The Nervous System

**Definition**: Brain and all the nerves in the body

- Neuroplasticity *“What fires together wires together”* (Hebb, 1944)
- Sympathetic Nervous System
  - Think of it like the gas pedal on a car
- Parasympathetic Nervous System
  - Think of it like the brake pedal
- Genetics and temperament shapes children’s responses

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Window of Tolerance – Capacity to Cope

- GAS
  - Regulated Sympathetic System
    - Fight | Flight
    - Dissociated Rage or Panic
  - Dysregulated Sympathetic System
    - Primitive Dorsal Vagal
    - Immobility - Freeze
    - Dissociated Collapse
- BRAKE
  - Regulated Parasympathetic System
    - Connect
    - Rest and Digest
  - Dysregulated Parasympathetic System
    - Primitive Dorsal Vagal
    - Immobility - Freeze
    - Dissociated Collapse

Adapted from (Lee, Porges & Ogden in Wheatley-Crosbie 2006)
Healthy Ways That You Can Regulate

• What do you do to put on the gas?
• What do you do to put on the brake?
• List three things that you do to self-regulate

The Brain & Development

Parts Of The Brain

CEREBRAL CORTEX

 PREFRONTAL CORTEX

 LIMBIC SYSTEM

 AMYGDALA

 HIPPOCAMPUS

 BRAIN STEM
The Downstairs and Upstairs Brain

- The *“Downstairs Brain”* (Siegel and Bryson, 2011) includes the limbic region and the brain stem, it is more primitive and is responsible for:
  - Basic functions (breathing, heart rate etc.)
  - Survival Response (fight, flight or freeze)
  - Strong emotions (anger, fear)
  - Like a thermostat in regulation

- The *“Upstairs Brain”* (Siegel and Bryson, 2011) includes the cerebral cortex, is most recently evolved and is responsible for:
  - Executive Functioning (thinking, imagining, planning)
  - Soothing the “Downstairs Brain”

The Downstairs and Upstairs Brain and Self-Regulation

- *Upstairs Brain – Under Construction*
  - Comes online more fully at age 2 and is fully developed by mid 20’s
  - Activated amygdala is like an alarm – blocks access to the Upstairs Brain
  - Developmentally, children need another nervous system to help settle themselves
  - During development the pathways in our brain are created for the survival responses of fight, flight, and freeze, as well as soothing

Trauma and Development

- Children do not understand their nervous system, their body and how it responds to trauma
- Children’s understanding is shaped by the developmental stage they are in

  “Children’s traumatizing experiences, particularly when chronic, can compromise all areas of childhood development...”

  James, 1994
Keeping your balance

• We invite you to take a break and settle yourself:
  • Get up and stretch, go for a walk
  • Take some deep, even, slow breaths
  • Call or text a friend
  • Listen to some music

Working Towards Trauma Resolution

Importance of Co-Regulation

• Using our own nervous system to help regulate another nervous system
  • Eventually leads to children practicing self-regulation
• Children and youth also respond to the adults reactions to the traumatic event
  • Positive and negative responses and reactions
Working Towards Trauma Resolution
- Creating Safety and Stabilization
- Developing resources
- Being empowered, having a voice, real choice and being able to collaborate
- Working with/integrating memories *(or not)* is optional
- Developing Safe and Healthy Relationships
  - Developing a coherent story about the child, the trauma and their capacity to grow

Trauma Begins To Be Resolved By...
- Learning to self-regulate
  - Increases capacity to cope and promotes resilience
  - Assists in mastering their developmental stage
- Making meaning
  - Creating a coherent story or narrative
  - Repair and Reconnect – with self and others
- Using appropriate resources – cultural, play
- Regaining Hope

Keeping your balance
- We invite you to take a break and settle yourself
  - Stretch, move around your space
  - Take some deep, even, slow breaths
  - Look around your space. What do you notice
  - Notice if your space is the right temperature
Understanding Freeze

Why Focus on Freeze, Flight, and Fight?

- Central to being trauma-informed
- Recognizing that our survival responses are hard-wired in our nervous systems
- Describes many of the patterns of children and adults' behavior that we see and helps to make sense of why they happen

Examples of Freeze

- Spacey, “not here”
- Disconnected from yourself
- Frozen, numb, can’t move
- Stuck in some part of the body
- “I don’t know” – and they don’t
- No voice
Dissociation Continuum

- Dissociation is adaptive and exists on a continuum (Braun, 1988)
  - Daydreaming | Freeze | Shock
- A neurological event that occurs under extreme stress can result in blocked memory and emotions, bodily numbness (Rothschild, 2000)
- To split consciousness in some way resulting is distortions of experience and memory (Rothschild, 2006, 2010)

Tools For Responding To Freeze

- Settle your body, engage your upstairs brain, use your curiosity (Siegel and Bryson, 2011)
- Notice their bodily sensations – feet on the floor, seat on the chair, take a deep breath
- Connect to the present – ask them to name something in the room they see - a neutral object (not you) 5-4-3-2-1 exercise
- Remind them they are going to be ok – how can they notice this
- Understanding freeze helps develop a sense of control

Flashbacks - Connecting To The Present

- Flashbacks are memories that do not know they are memories
- Help them learn skills to connect to the present
- Help them know that “it” is over
- Flashback protocol (Rothschild, 2006, 2010)
Keeping Your Balance

Understanding Readiness and Flight

Readiness – Try This

- Imagine a small child is running towards you, full speed, wanting to give you a hug
- How would you stand so as not to be tipped over when you catch them
  - Place one foot a little ahead of the other
  - Bend your knees, tightening your muscles
  - Hold your arms open, tightening your muscles preparing to catch the child
  - Remember to breathe
  - Notice what it is like to hold this position
Examples of Flight

- Restless, fidgety
- Jumpy legs
- Big or darting eyes
- Feeling trapped, “gotta’ get out of here”
- Wanting to get away
- Rapid breathing
- Pounding heart

Tools For Flight

- Settle your body, engage your upstairs brain, use your curiosity (Bryson and Siegel, 2011)
- Name it to tame it (Bryson and Siegel, 2011)
  - Validating the impulse to get away and helping them to understand this is survival response
  - Listening for, acknowledging where they would want to be
- Encourage Movement - squirming, fidgeting, pacing
  - Engage them in moving their bodies, this promotes self regulation
  - Insisting on direct eye contact can be threatening

Tools For Flight (Cont.)

- Predictability and planning – co-regulating
- Create an imaginary safe place within themselves
- Containment exercises – using large muscle groups of the legs
- Maintaining connection
  - Expressing worry vs. anger about their desire to run away or when they actually run away
  - Negotiating contact using phone calls, texts, emails, Facebook, twitter
  - Reconnecting - What message do you want to communicate when they return?
Examples of Fight

- Snarl, glare
- Raised voice, “I hate you”
- Argumentative “You don’t understand”
- Move towards you
- Desire to stomp, kick
- Muscles tighten, clenched hands

Tools For Fight

- Settle your body, engage your brain, use your curiosity (Bryson and Siegel, 2011)
- Name it to tame it (Bryson and Siegel, 2011)
- Help them settle their bodies – then talk about consequences
  - Containment exercise using large muscles of the arms
- Safety planning – home and workplace
- Non-negotiable soothing
We’re Stuck – Adults and Kids Caught in Fight

- Getting stuck is inevitable for both adults and kids
- Your acknowledging “being stuck” helps kids (and adults) recognize their pattern
- “Stuck” is a discussion you can share separate from the argument
- The two sides are often saying “don’t yell” or “you’re not listening to me”
- Allows you to reassure and repair the rupture after a fight or getting stuck
- “We will find a way to get through this, we will get unstuck.”

How to talk to children about freeze, flight and fight

**Do:**
- Create a sense of safety
- Make the experience playful and fun
- Engage everyone’s curiosity
- Learn what helps them settle
- Stop when needed and help them to settle
- Have caregivers &/or parents participate fully

**Don’t:**
- Make children or youth talk about their past experiences
- Scare children to demonstrate what survival responses are like

Resource available at [www.makingsenseoftrauma.ca](http://www.makingsenseoftrauma.ca)
What Is Mindfulness

"Paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally"
Kabat-Zinn, 1994

- Examples of mindfulness practices: eating mindfully, walking meditation, meditation, centering prayer,
- Many examples of guided mindfulness practices on YouTube or other resources online

Keeping Your Balance

Guided Meditation

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CVW_IE1nsKE&feature=related

Compassion

- We are all compassionate when we show empathy, love and kindness to others.
- The incredible power of compassion is that it renews the receiver and the giver.
- Importance of self-compassion in healing
  - www.chcm-csrm.ca/compassion-project
  - www.self-compassion.org
  - www.mindfulselfcompassion.org
When More Bad Things Happen

- Give age appropriate information
- Keep a routine
- Limit access to TV, particularly news, or watch with them
- Offer reassurance/information
  - I am here
  - We are going to get through this
- It is appropriate to seek help if changes in behaviour persist past 6-8 weeks
- Get assistance for yourself
- Further training – mentalhealthfirstaid.ca

How To Listen To Trauma Stories

- Co-regulation
  - Keeping yourself regulated
- Helping them self-regulate
  - Connect to the present, notice their breath and heart rate, managing your own response
- Listening to the story and staying within the window of tolerance
  - Start at the end of the story (if possible)
  - Interrupting gently, taking a break, hearing a little bit of the story at a time if possible
- What’s helping them get through
  - If you can, start by helping them know they will get through the current challenge
Creating New Pathways

- Pathways are created in our brain when we repeat a pattern of thoughts or images over and over, negative or positive patterns.
  - Create opportunities for integration with new pathways
  - Promotes self-regulation and stability
- How to create new pathways:
  - Imagine having the help from a trusted adult (missing resource)
  - Imagine a safe place
  - Practicing new self or co-regulation strategies

Grief And Sadness

- Loss threatens a person’s sense of safety, mastery and control
  - Especially for children who are in care. They have lost a great deal when they come into care family relationships, possessions, community
- Children grieve at their developmental age not necessarily their chronological age
- It is important to create space, time and rituals to enable a child to grieve
  - Be present
  - Acknowledging sadness/anger can be the first step
  - Helping them recognize that the waves of emotion/sensation can pass
  - Teach them to settle themselves
  - Help them to honor who or what they are grieving

How We Heal Is In Relationship

- Ruptures occur in all relationships
- Repair is a choice we all make – offering a gesture of repair or accepting it
  - Children often make small gestures of repair that are overlooked e.g. can you play with me
  - Offering repair teaches and models for children how to build and maintain healthy relationships
- You and the child know that the relationship is restored (the amygdala has been settled) when the gesture of repair is accepted
  - How might you offer or accept a gesture of repair?
  - Can you and your child plan how you will repair after the next rupture?
When My Nervous System Is Regulated

- I am operating within my window of tolerance
- I feel: curious, connected to my body, open to connect, competent, relaxed yet alert, responsive and present
- I know I have choices and options and can reach out for support
- I recognize when I am moving out of my window of tolerance and have tools to re-establish stability

Laughing Baby
What regulation of a nervous system looks like...
Principles of Being Trauma-Informed

- Safety
- Empowerment, voice and choice
- Trustworthiness and transparency
- Peer support
- Collaboration and mutuality
- Cultural, historical and gender issues
- Recognizing that trauma is pervasive
- Understanding freeze, flight and fight responses

Becoming Trauma-Informed

- Who are your supports?
  - Whose nervous system helps you regulate yours?
  - Do they know to check in?
  - Do you know when to ask for help?
- For professionals
  - How do you use supervision?
  - Do you schedule it or wait for it to happen?
Making Sense of Trauma For Children And Youth

- Assisting children/youth/adults in understanding freeze/flight/fight and how their bodies respond to threat
- Learning to self-regulate
- Reconnection and repair of relationships
- Making meaning – Help children and youth create or imagine a possible ending to the story
- Back on track developmentally – We need to be able to differentiate between healthy development and responses to trauma

Thank you for your attention and participation.