

# Trauma-informed practices for finals

For some of us, the COVID-19 pandemic is one of the deepest experiences of trauma we've had. Trauma can be defined as "any experience in which a person's internal resources are not adequate to cope with external stressors" (Hoch et al., 2015). Between the pandemic, a contentious national election, and the various stressors we each experience, many of us are finding our internal resources drained. But there are still a few weeks left in the semester – including finals. What can we do in the coming weeks to reduce external stressors on ourselves and our students, and build up our internal resources?

Individuals experiencing trauma respond and behave in different ways. In the context of education, some of the ways that we might observe symptoms of trauma in students are:

- Missing a lot of class or not engaging in online coursework
- Difficulty focusing, recalling and retaining information
- Display anger, helplessness and fear
- Anxiety about deadlines, exams, group work or public speaking (Davidson, 2017)

You've likely noticed students displaying these behaviors throughout this stressful semester, and especially as we approach the high-stakes end of the semester. It's important to recognize these behaviors as likely trauma responses rather than laziness or disinterest in your course. This recognition might look like calling a student after they miss a synchronous Zoom session, rather than docking their attendance grade. It might also mean emailing a student with suggested deadline extensions if they miss an assignment. Finally, you can simply be transparent with your students, that we are all under a lot of stress and that you intend to support them as much as possible. If you can become a trusted support for your students, they are likely to have more success in your class and in others.

According to Linda Thai, who [co-presented a Trauma-Informed Pedagogy Workshop](#) to UAF faculty, two imperatives for supporting people experiencing trauma are safety and building resilience, competence, and confidence. A safe environment is one that is predictable, stable and transparent. For your course, this might mean you set clear and simple deadlines and expectations for final

assignments and exams. You might share a study guide or sample questions if you are offering an exam. For a written or project-based final, share examples of successful past projects, as well as a rubric or other clear guidelines on how you plan to assess the work.

To build students' confidence and competence you can offer positive, constructive feedback and opportunities for students to show their strengths. Before we hit finals, ask students for a proposal for their final paper/project and focus your feedback on highlighting everything that works well and the ideas they should pursue. You might also offer some practice quizzes/exams before an upcoming exam and allow students unlimited attempts to get all the questions right. You might even consider [revising your finals plan](#) to allow students more choice in how they show what they've learned.

It's been a long semester full of uncertainty and as much as our students are feeling it, we are too. As we move into these final few weeks, recognize that you, too, may have experienced this year, let alone this semester, as traumatic. Perhaps you've struggled to take care of yourself and/or your family in the ways you are accustomed to, as your internal resources are being spent elsewhere. The stretch that all of us have been feeling these last few months is one that some of our students and colleagues experience regularly if they have histories or current experiences of trauma. This is particularly true for those of us who are Alaska Native and people of color, LGBTQIA, and/or otherwise marginalized. The trauma-informed approaches we've shared for this semester are best practices for making our classes and our university more welcoming and accessible in general.

## References

- Davidson, S. (2017, August). Trauma-informed practices for post-secondary education. <https://educationnorthwest.org/sites/default/files/resources/trauma-informed-practices-postsecondary-508.pdf>
- Hoch, A., Stewart, D., Webb, K., & Wyandt-Hiebert, M.A. (2015, May). Trauma-informed care on a college campus. Presentation at the annual meeting of the American College Health Association, Orlando, FL.